



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on the development and use of common assessments.

Common Assessments: Uncommon Results



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

An emphasis on assessment practices in education is all around us. It seems almost daily that I receive in an e-mail or a letter a new brochure or flyer advertising the latest conferences that will promote new assessment ideas or the latest strategies educators should implement to improve student learning. The ideas all sound promising but there are so many that one wonders how teachers can keep all the ideas straight. New terminology is flooding the articles, books, and workshops giving fresh (and potentially overwhelming) ways to look at how students are assessed. Assessments are described as transformative, in-the-moment, formative, summative, and balanced. There are power assessments, system-level assessments, and benchmark assessments. Even the most dedicated and open-minded individual might find it impossible to keep all of the ideas straight or to know where and how to start using the information.

There is, however, one practice that I have found to be sensible, reliable, and most promising to positively impact student learning. The practice I am referring to is the consistent development and use of common assessments among teams of teachers. When teachers take the time to clearly investigate and understand how common assessments can augment student achievement, they become excited and motivated to continue their collaborative work. I have also spoken with interested educators who have a lot of good questions about common assessment but do not know exactly how to get started. To that end, this month's *Just for the ASKing!* is devoted to addressing the questions surrounding this exciting approach to teaching and learning. Below are the FAQ's along with some suggestions as to how to bring the concept alive and sustain its use.

What is a common assessment?

A common assessment is a uniform tool developed and administered in a given time frame by all teachers in a grade level or course. The assessment includes various types of questions to measure students' understanding of essential knowledge. After administering the assessment, the teachers score the students' work and compile the results. Data from the assessments are shared at a team or department meeting in order to determine how teachers should respond to the assessment data. Ultimately, the goal is to use assessment data to provide immediate feedback and support to students in order to ensure student learning and academic progress.

What is the purpose of using common assessments?

The goal of using common assessments is to ensure that the continual focus is on higher levels of achievement for all students. When teachers develop and use common assessments, they must provide all students with access to the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of who their teacher is. When teachers openly talk about the content they teach, there is a greater likelihood that all students will have a common educational experience. After there is concurrence on the content that must be taught, teachers create assessments that accurately measure student learning. The professional dialogue which occurs while the results of the assessments are analyzed is an important payoff from this collaborative process.

How are common assessments developed?

Common assessments may be developed in a variety of ways. Some teachers create assessments by having each team member bring possible assessment questions to a planning meeting. Others provide questions from previous assessments they have used to determine if previous questions accurately and adequately measure student learning. Still others review possible assessment items from released questions from former statewide assessments. Finally, some districts create common assessments centrally and schools are required to use district-wide common assessments. Regardless of how the assessment is developed, what is most important is that all teachers teach the same knowledge and skills, and that all teachers teaching the same content work together to create assessments which are clearly matched to standards.

What forms can common assessments take?

Common assessments may take a variety of forms depending on the standards, the curriculum being taught, the make-up of the student population, and the desired outcomes. Assessments may include multiple choice questions, require students to respond to essay questions or writing prompts, or be performance-based in nature. However, common assessments should not be excessively long, unnecessarily complicated, or hard to analyze. Regardless of what form the assessment may take, the main purpose of the assessment is to determine if the students are mastering the required standards.

What are some misconceptions about common assessments?

Some teachers who are just learning about common assessments have misunderstandings about what they are and how they should be used. Misconceptions include the following:

- **Common assessments are used to “grade” the teacher.** Some teachers feel that they become vulnerable when the results from the common assessment are publicly presented and discussed with fellow teachers. They feel that the data from the assessments may be used to evaluate their effectiveness as a teacher. This practice by leaders would be a step backward. The purpose of common assessments is to encourage honest, open dialogue among practitioners and the sharing of best practices. The misuse of data from those discussions as part of a teacher’s evaluation will only lead to distrust among the teaching staff and cause teachers to be more isolated.
- **Every assessment must be a common assessment.** Teachers who develop and utilize common assessments still maintain individual autonomy to develop and use additional assessments that will help them measure student learning.
- **Common assessments require lockstep pacing and uniform instruction on the parts of teachers.** When teachers agree to devise and administer common assessments, it is important for the assessment to be given to students within a certain window of time. However, teaching is not a mechanical process and students are not all the same. Thus, a teacher must pace instruction to meet the needs of his or her students. While it is true that the teachers must teach the same standards, teachers do not have to deliver their lessons in the same exact manner as their peers. Just as students learn differently, individual teachers have different skills, different stories and examples, and different methods of teaching their content.
- **Common assessments will require an inordinate amount of extra work.** Some teachers believe that common assessments are extra assessments above and beyond the assessments they already use. Teachers should not be required or feel the necessity to develop more or different assessments. Teachers who have

worked with their peers over time in the development of common assessments actually have found that the practice is a time saver. When teachers jointly develop an assessment, the questions are often clearer, they accurately measure student learning, and they may be used when the content or unit is taught again.

How should teachers analyze the data from common assessments?

Collaborative teams can analyze the results from common assessments in several ways:

- Some teams compile data question-by-question and look at student responses to each question. The ensuing conversations can help teachers identify the instructional methods that were most effective in leading to student understanding.
- Some teams bring samples of student work to team meetings and sort the work into different categories based on whether student work was above standard, met the standard, or was below standard. Once again, the close examination of the work and agreement on levels of achievement can result in a more consistent evaluation of student learning.

The truly important part of the analysis of assessment data is the accompanying discussions to determine which specific teaching methods elicited the greatest results.

What should teachers do with the results from common assessments?

Thomas Guskey, who writes extensively about assessment practices, has noted that assessments by themselves do little to improve student learning. He stresses that “what really counts happens after the assessments.” Some grade level or curriculum teams develop what Rick DuFour calls a “pyramid of interventions” of student support strategies. These responses provide timely assistance so every student can move toward higher achievement. Possible interventions include:

- Small group or one-on-one instruction by an individual teacher
- Small group or one-on-one instruction by a student or students
- Use of all time during the school day – before school tutoring, instruction during a designated support period in the school day, or after school support sessions
- Feedback to students and the opportunity to be reassessed to determine if a higher level of achievement has been reached

What are some unique practices related to common assessments that schools are using?

Some creative and potentially effective strategies are being carried out in schools across the country. Here are some options schools may wish to explore:

- One practice that has shown some positive results is **advanced planning**. As teachers teach their current unit, they meet to collaborate on a future unit. They discuss the standards all teachers must address and create common assessments prior to the beginning of the next unit. When teachers know well in advance how students’ learning will be assessed, they can plan instruction that is more likely to lead to improved student learning and success on assessments.
- While some teachers develop common assessments that are more in line with state-required multiple choice tests, other teachers have developed rubrics to measure success rates on common assessments.
- Some schools have found success in having short, weekly common assessments (five questions) so that teachers are able to respond to student misunderstandings more quickly.
- Successful collaborative teams have made an adjustment in their way of thinking in that they focus on **results** and not **intentions**.
- When teachers “begin with the end in mind,” they complete a task analysis during the planning process and create their assessment(s) at the beginning of the planning process. As they instruct, they frame their learning so that students can be successful when they complete their assessment(s). The result is that remediation, intervention, and follow-up are minimized or non-existent because students are successful the first time around.

When teachers meet together to develop common assessments, it is essential that there be explicit trust among the participating members. Confidentiality is paramount if teachers are willing to share their thoughts, and perhaps doubts, with their peers. The work to develop these assessments may be rocky or frustrating. But with persistence, the collaborative efforts can lead to powerful and exciting learning on the parts of determined professionals. Rick DuFour has stated, “Hosts of researchers have concluded that substantive change inevitably creates discomfort and dissonance as people are asked to act in new ways.” No important change can occur without some frustration and hard work. I believe that the subsequent learning that can occur from the development and use of common assessments can transform the way teachers teach and assess, and lead to unforeseen results previously unattained.

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