

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

### Five Assessment Myths and Their Consequences

By Rick Stiggins

America has spent 60 years building layer upon layer of district, state, national, and international assessments at immense cost—and with little evidence that our assessment practices have improved learning. True, testing data have revealed achievement problems. But revealing problems and helping fix them are two entirely different things.

As a member of the measurement community, I find this legacy very discouraging. It causes me to reflect deeply on my role and function. Are we helping students and teachers with our assessment practices, or contributing to their problems?

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—Bob Dahm

My reflections have brought me to the conclusion that assessment's impact on the improvement of schools has been severely limited by several widespread but erroneous beliefs about what role it ought to play. Here are five of the most problematic of these assessment myths:

#### **Myth 1: The path to school improvement is paved with standardized tests.**

Evidence of the strength of this belief is seen in the evolution, intensity, and immense investment in our large-scale testing programs. We have been ranking states on the basis of average college-admission-test scores since the 1950s, comparing schools based on districtwide testing since the 1960s, comparing districts

based on state assessments since the 1970s, comparing states based on national assessment since the 1980s, and comparing nations on the basis of international assessments since the 1990s. Have schools improved as a result?

The problem is that once-a-year assessments have never been able to meet the information needs of the decisionmakers who contribute the most to determining the effectiveness of schools: students and teachers, who make such decisions every three to four minutes. The brief history of our investment in testing outlined above includes no reference to day-to-day classroom assessment, which represents 99.9 percent of the assessments in a student's school life. We have almost completely neglected classroom assessment in our obsession with standardized testing. Had we not, our path to school

improvement would have been far more productive.

### **Myth 2: School and community leaders know how to use assessment to improve schools.**

Over the decades, very few educational leaders have been trained to understand what standardized tests measure, how they relate to the local curriculum, what the scores mean, how to use them, or, indeed, whether better instruction can influence scores. Beyond this, we in the measurement community have narrowed our role to maximizing the efficiency and accuracy of high-stakes testing, paying little attention to the day-to-day impact of test scores on teachers or learners in the classroom.

Many in the business community believe that we get better schools by comparing them based on annual test scores, and then rewarding or punishing them. They do not understand the negative impact on students and teachers in struggling schools that continuously lose in such competition. Politicians at all levels believe that if a little intimidation doesn't work, a lot of intimidation will, and assessment has been used to increase anxiety. They too misunderstand the implications for struggling schools and learners.

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### **Myth 3: Teachers are trained to assess productively.**

Teachers can spend a quarter or more of their professional time involved in assessment-related activities. If they assess accurately and use results effectively, their students can prosper. Administrators, too, use assessment to make crucial curriculum and resource-allocation decisions that can improve school quality.

Given the critically important roles of assessment, it is no surprise that Americans believe teachers are thoroughly trained to assess accurately and use assessment productively. In fact, teachers typically have not been given the opportunity to learn these things during preservice preparation or while they are teaching. This has been the case for decades. And lest we believe that teachers can turn to their principals or other district leaders for help in learning about sound assessment practices, let it be known that relevant, helpful assessment training is rarely included in leadership-preparation programs either.

### **Myth 4: Adult decisions drive school effectiveness.**

We assess to inform instructional decisions. Annual tests inform annual decisions made by school leaders. Interim tests used formatively permit faculty teams to fine-tune programs. Classroom assessment helps teachers know what comes next in learning, or what grades go on report cards. In all cases, the assessment results inform the grown-ups who run the system.

But there are other data-based instructional decisionmakers present in classrooms whose influence over learning success is greater than that of the adults. I refer, of course, to students. Nowhere in our 60-year assessment legacy do we find reference to students as assessment users and instructional decisionmakers. But, in fact, they interpret the feedback we give them to decide whether they have hope of future success, whether the learning is worth the energy it will take to attain it, and whether to keep trying. If students conclude that there is no hope, it doesn't matter what the adults decide. Learning stops. The most valid and reliable "high stakes" test, if it causes students to give up in hopelessness, cannot be regarded as productive. It does more harm than good.

### **Myth 5: Grades and test scores maximize student motivation and learning.**

Most of us grew up in schools that left lots of students behind. By the end of high school, we were ranked based on achievement. There were winners and losers. Some rode winning streaks to confident,

successful life trajectories, while others failed early and often, found recovery increasingly difficult, and ultimately gave up. After 13 years, a quarter of us had dropped out and the rest were dependably ranked. Schools operated on the belief that if I fail you or threaten to do so, it will cause you to try harder. This was only true for those who felt in control of the success contingencies. For the others, chronic failure resulted, and the intimidation minimized their learning. True hopelessness always trumps pressure to learn.

Society has changed the mission of its schools to “leave no child behind.” We want all students to meet state standards. This requires that all students believe they can succeed. Frequent success and infrequent failure must pave the path to optimism. This represents a fundamental redefinition of productive assessment dynamics.

Classroom-assessment researchers have discovered how to assess *for* learning to accomplish this. Assessment *for* learning (as opposed to *of* learning) has a profoundly positive impact on achievement, especially for struggling learners, as has been verified through rigorous scientific research conducted around the world. But, again, our educators have never been given the opportunity to learn about it.

Sound assessment is not something to be practiced once a year. As we look to the future, we must balance annual, interim or benchmark, and classroom assessment. Only then will we meet the critically important information needs of all instructional decisionmakers. We must build a long-missing foundation of assessment literacy at all levels of the system, so that we know how to assess accurately and use results productively. This will require an unprecedented investment in professional learning both at the preservice and in-service levels for teachers and administrators, and for policymakers as well.

Of greatest importance, however, is that we acknowledge the key role of the learner in the assessment-learning connection. We must begin to use classroom assessment to help all students experience continuous success and come to believe in themselves as learners.

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