

Laying the Foundation



The Building Blocks of Assessment Success

Laying the Foundation

1

To succeed in standards-based school improvement we must be clear about what students need to know and be able to do, and we need to be skillful in how we teach. To be certain that students have learned what we intend for them to learn, we must develop balanced assessment systems that provide data on how students are progressing, systems that also use the classroom assessment process to promote even greater learning. What we teach, how we teach it, how well we assess, and how we use assessment to improve student achievement will all determine the success of our efforts, and ultimately, how we are judged.

Today's standards-based environment is a very different one from when the focus was on effective schools research, when instructional leadership and teacher supervision were common topics in principal training programs. Today, with school improvement taking on more urgency due to federal, state, and local accountability requirements and the resulting need to raise test scores, improving leadership knowledge and skill is being leveraged as one more strategy directly aimed at raising student achievement.

Evidence suggests that the culture we create in our schools can positively influence student success. Collaborative cultures emphasizing teamwork and continuous learning and improvement are positioned to deliver the sustained professional support teachers need, support aimed at demonstrable results in student achievement. And the role of the leader continues to be studied, with scholars and practitioners alike working to translate research into practice, describing what effective leadership looks and sounds like. The number of websites, books, articles, and conferences devoted to the subject of school leadership makes it clear that part of the success equation for schools is in the office of the principal. Research evidence shows the difference effective school leaders can have on student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Leaders must be focused not only on what to improve, but also on how to engender the institutional changes necessary for greater student success (Davidovich, Nikolay, Laugerman, & Commodore, 2010). This focus requires a dual mindset of consistency and innovation (Fullan, 2008).

This focus on the role and effectiveness of the school leader provides new understandings about the nature of leadership, and is in part influenced by thinking outside of education. Earlier contributions from business management (Covey, 1989; Peters

& Waterman, 1982; Senge, 1990) and from human psychology/motivation (Blanchard & Johnson, 1982) are joined by current thinking and insight (Collins, 2001; Gladwell, 2000; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). All share a common foundation in that they describe principles and values by which leaders can live and work, principles more complex than simply following a checklist of behaviors or practices applied in isolation from a set of core beliefs.

Historically we have sustained a set of beliefs about assessment's role in improving schools that does not promote success for all students. Given our new educational mission of helping all students master standards of learning, the time has come to examine those beliefs and determine if they are preventing us from using the assessment process to promote learning. If so, we need to adopt new beliefs that will drive assessment practices centered on student success. This calls for leaders who can lead their organizations through the exploration of a whole new set of assessment beliefs and practices. This guide details Seven Actions that leaders can take to complete that exploration and, in doing so, provide an assessment environment where all students will prosper, especially those who struggle to learn.

Working at the System Level

The current assessment reality for most school administrators is dominated by the need for students to demonstrate mastery of content standards on annual state assessments. This guide reflects our belief, backed by research, that quality assessment used effectively day to day in the classroom is integral to student success. Further, we believe that classroom assessment is a key part of the foundation both for school improvement and for standards-based teaching and learning, and is a key component in a balanced assessment system.

This guide provides a structure through which you as a district or school leader can do the following:

- Refine your vision of excellence in assessment for your school or district.
- Examine the beliefs, practices, knowledge, and actions needed to realize your vision.
- Make connections between quality assessment and your organization's mission, belief statements, and improvement plans.
- Develop an action plan to turn your vision into reality.

By using this guide in a local leadership study team with your colleagues, including district and building administrators and teacher leaders, you can achieve a balanced, instructionally relevant local assessment system in which classroom, interim/bench-

mark, and annual assessments can both support and verify learning. You can balance assessments *for* learning and assessments *of* learning effectively, ensuring they serve their intended purpose.

Seven Actions to Ensure Student Success

Developing an action plan for assessment balance and quality requires a local school or district to conduct a self-evaluation of its current assessment system. In this guide we provide a tool for this analysis based on how thoroughly the school or district has completed the following Seven Actions:

- 1.** Balance the district’s assessment system to meet all key user needs.
- 2.** Refine achievement standards to reflect clear and appropriate expectations at all levels.
- 3.** Ensure assessment quality in all contexts to support good decision making.
- 4.** Help learners become assessors by using assessment *for* learning strategies in the classroom.
- 5.** Build communication systems to support and report student learning.
- 6.** Motivate students with learning success.
- 7.** Provide the professional development needed to ensure a foundation of assessment literacy throughout the system.

Supporting the Learning of the Leaders

Beyond working at the systems level for achieving assessment balance and quality, this Action Guide also will help you as a school leader analyze your individual knowledge about assessment and can guide your continuing learning about sound assessment practices. By completing the work presented here, you will continue to develop your own assessment literacy. This guide will help you and your team do the following:

- Understand the need for an assessment system that is balanced, meeting the information needs of key users from the classroom, interim/benchmark, and annual testing levels.
- Understand the need for all assessments to be of high quality.

- Understand the beliefs and practices that must underlie a quality, balanced assessment program.
- Understand the Seven Actions that can bring quality and balance to local systems.
- Analyze the district's current status regarding completion of these actions.
- Develop a plan for completing the Seven Actions that will bring assessment excellence to the district and its classrooms.
- Understand classroom assessment *for* learning practices and their relationship to student achievement.
- Analyze your own assessment knowledge and leadership skills relative to a set of competencies for school leaders that are instrumental in completing the Seven Actions.

Contents of This Action Guide

Figure 1-1 shows the building blocks of assessment success. It also maps our journey through this Action Guide. To help you and your leadership team develop understanding of each of the building blocks, we've divided this book into five parts.

Part 1: Laying the Foundation

Part 1 introduces this guide's purpose and goals, describes both its print and media contents, and explains its use in the context of a school or district leadership study team.

We encourage the same model of professional development for this Action Guide that we advocate for teachers to become assessment literate. All it requires is a small group of school leaders willing to meet regularly and invest the necessary time in their own professional growth and in the improvement of their local system. By acquiring certain understandings, considering important issues, and planning for the future as a team, leaders demonstrate the commitment to learning sought in all aspects of school culture.

Part 2: Building the Vision

Part 2 assists you in building a vision for your assessment system. We outline our own vision and describe the foundation necessary to develop an assessment system rooted in balance, quality, and student involvement. We ask you to reflect on that vision to

Figure 1-1 The Building Blocks of Assessment Success



help further extend your concept of what your own assessment system should look like.

Part 2 also guides you in seeing the connections between your organization's current work and direction with that of quality assessment. Many districts and schools have established their mission/vision and have developed plans to make their mission/vision real in every classroom. But sometimes all of this work at all levels of the organization seems chaotic, disjointed, or sporadic. Assessment literacy is a powerful coherence maker (Fullan, 2001). Seeing the connections between what the district is already trying to accomplish and sound assessment practices can help stimulate and organize the district around its mission.

Part 3: The Path to Assessment Balance and Quality

Part 3 asks leadership teams to consider the Seven Actions that lead to a comprehensive assessment system. After introducing the Actions, we ask you to analyze your own

system regarding its current status relative to each, then provide suggestions on how you can close the gap between where your self-evaluation shows you to be now and where you could be.

Part 4: Required Skills for Assessment Balance and Quality

In Part 4 we shift emphasis from analyzing organizational and institutional assessment excellence to examining the assessment knowledge and skills that individual leaders need. We also examine further the knowledge and skills needed by classroom teachers, and help school leaders see how they can support teachers in their professional development and ongoing classroom assessment practice.

Part 5: Planning for Action

In the fifth and final part we ask you to think about both your organizational analysis from Part 3 as well as your individual analysis from Part 4, and use them to create the action plan that will lead to assessment balance and quality in your school or district. We assist you in prioritizing actions and offer suggestions for evaluating your action plan both before and during its implementation.

Additional Content

From time to time, we will ask your team to pause to discuss and reflect on certain aspects of assessment and their implications for your school or district. We have included activities, all under the heading of “Thinking About Assessment,” to help you consider, clarify, and use the ideas and strategies presented. For each activity we include the purpose, approximate time frames, needed materials, suggested room setups, and step-by-step directions. Some activities also include resource sheets, pages that can help your team prepare for and organize successful implementation of balanced assessment systems. Some are best suited for use with the leadership team; others can be used as faculty meeting or inservice activities with teachers.

CD and DVD

This guide also includes a CD-ROM and a DVD, found in plastic sleeves inside the back cover.

The CD-ROM contains reproducible copies of the activity descriptions and resource sheets, as well as tools for leaders to use with other educators when working through the assessment ideas and issues presented here.

The DVD, *Developing Balanced Assessment Systems: Seven Essential Actions for Schools and Districts*, features Dr. Rick Stiggins. In this 35-minute presentation, Dr. Stiggins describes and discusses each of the Seven Actions.

For Teachers: Classroom Assessment for Student Learning

This Action Guide is aimed at helping leaders understand what they can do to ensure balance and quality in local assessment systems. No doubt you already realize, however, that teachers play the pivotal role in using assessment to promote even greater student learning. The skills and knowledge teachers need, although introduced in this book for leaders, are not explicitly taught in this guide. The content we do introduce as central to what assessment-literate teachers do in the classroom is drawn primarily from *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well* (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006) and *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning* (Chappuis, 2009).

