

# Introduction

We have written this book as parents, intensely interested and actively involved in our daughter's learning. We also have written it as educators with a lifelong investment in teaching both children and adults, believing strongly in the power of classroom assessment to improve student learning. We have written this book as community members, interested in contributing to the success of our local schools and the improvement of public education in general.

We have written this book for parents, educators, and community members with the goal of increasing understanding about assessment in schools, and more specifically about the important role classroom assessment can play in school improvement. Parents and the broader community constitute the largest audience for assessment results, and as such, we believe the information you receive ought to be clear and understandable. Beyond that, we want to prepare you to be critical consumers of assessment results. To that end, our purpose is to share what we think parents and community members ought to know about assessment practices that will maximize student success in school. We think some readers may find what we have to report a bit surprising.

## The Chapters Ahead

In the chapters that follow we describe what we believe are the assessment issues most important to understand if we, as a community, are to help improve our schools. Our ultimate goal is to help you identify assessment practices that contribute to

student failure and that potentially harm learners, and to show you other assessment practices that contribute to success and improve learning. To that end, we have structured each of the chapters around a set of guiding questions.

What is assessment? How has assessment changed since we were in school? Who are the key users of assessment information? What are the differences between assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning? In Chapter 1 we describe today's assessment landscape and discuss how its changing face affects students of today and tomorrow.

What assessment practices are likely to increase student motivation to learn? What role can assessment *for* learning play to support underachieving students? In Chapter 2 we explore the relationship between motivation and assessment. We look at what research tells us about connecting motivation and assessment in productive ways for *all* students.

Is there a high-quality written curriculum in place for each grade level and subject in my neighborhood schools? Is my child getting a clear picture of what she or he is to learn in school? How would I as a parent know that? Chapter 3 offers an explanation of the kinds of learning goals schools have and practices that make those goals clear to students.

What should I look for to determine the quality of the assessments my child experiences? Why is it important to see a variety of assessment methods used in my child's classroom? What does student involvement in assessment look like? What are productive ways to become involved in homework assignments? Chapter 4 describes the variety of classroom assessment methods and why each is used. We also look at productive and counterproductive homework practices.

What is a *standardized* test? Which of these tests do our children take in school, and what do they measure? How is standardized test information used? How do standardized tests and classroom assessments fit together? Measuring students' educational progress has never been easy and is becoming more challenging. Because the American public uses test results to develop opinions about the quality of schools, it is important to know that the assessments being used to form those opinions are accurate, and it is just as important to know what other indicators exist to help judge school quality. In Chapter 5 we explain the kinds of standardized tests students take and advocate for informed, careful use of test results.

How should the teacher/school/district communicate with us about our children's progress as learners? What factors should and should not be included in calculating report card grades? In what ways beyond test scores and grades can we learn about our children's progress? What role can students play in communicating about their own learning? Chapter 6 outlines answers to these questions.

Finally, in Chapter 7 we'll review key points from each chapter and link them to actions you can consider taking to help your children learn and to support assessment systems at the local level that promote student learning.

Throughout the book, we describe what a healthy, balanced assessment environment looks like in schools and classrooms. We offer ideas for how you as parents, educators, and community members can find out if this type of environment is in place in your schools. In this way, we hope to help you work with your child's teacher, school, district, and other parents and community members to get the best education possible for your children and *all* children in your community.