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Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students

Assessments Teachers Can Believe In: Ten Recommendations from Greater Boston Teachers

As Massachusetts moves toward a system in which teachers will be evaluated in part based on their students' learning growth on assessments, it is critical for policymakers to consider the following design elements for an improved assessment system. In order for teachers to see the system as valid and fair, these elements are essential.

1. Clarify the Purpose.

The first generation of MCAS was designed to monitor students and schools. Holding individual teachers accountable for their students' test performance is a significant shift for teachers to make. The purpose of an assessment system should be:

- To measure the extent to which students did (or did not) meet standards
- To give teachers useful information to help them improve instruction
- To further help teachers identify students' strengths, weaknesses, and progress

If the purpose of assessment is improving learning and teaching, leaders must back that up with sufficient support for teachers.

2. Ensure Accurate Teacher-Student Links.

Many teachers work with highly transient student populations and/or share responsibility for certain students. Research from Battelle for Kids shows that up to 40% of class rosters have inaccuracies (www.battelleforkids.org). Teachers need to know that they are accurately linked with students on which their growth scores are based—and they need opportunities to make corrections. We must get this right!

3. Capture and Report the Growth of Low- and High-Performing Students.

A student who enters fifth grade reading at a first grade level and exits reading at a third grade level has made two years worth of learning growth in one academic year. Yet, that student would still fail the fifth grade MCAS, and the tremendous progress his teacher had motivated would register as a failure on her part as well. As student test scores become high-stakes for teachers, we must avoid a dangerous threat to equity. Unless the growth of very low- and very high-performing students can be accurately assessed, the system risks exacerbating the disincentives for strong teachers to work with students who have the greatest educational needs. We cannot allow this to happen.

4. Report Results Immediately.

Assessment data can be a key tool for improving teaching. However, at present, students take MCAS in the spring and results are not reported until the next fall, when we have a whole new class of students with a different set of needs. This lag time reinforces the notion that assessments are for accountability and not for improving learning. Teachers also need to be able to directly access results online without having to go through an administrator.

5. Administer at Two Time Points.

Currently, many MCAS assessments are given annually in March. If student growth is calculated from March to March, only about 2/3 of a "tested year" is in the current teacher's control. The first 1/3 of the "tested year" happened

in the prior grade with a different teacher. To more fairly evaluate a teacher's impact, the starting point and ending point for the data must be in our control.

Note: Two time points per school year represents a minimum bar. Those of us participating in high quality formative assessment systems that are aligned to MCAS (such as Achievement Network) value getting data on our students' progress toward proficiency at multiple points during the year.

6. Cut Extraneous Assessments.

Many students currently participate in a redundant web of up to 15 different types of tests annually. This is too many! A smarter assessment system is a more streamlined assessment system that minimizes students' time filling in bubbles, but gets teachers and others the data they need.

7. Better Align Assessments to Standards.

Many teachers are frequently assessing students on material they have not yet been taught. Teachers already know the (unhelpful) results such tests will yield. Assessments should provide new information to improve instruction and learning.

8. Offer More Support for Data Analysis and Aligned Professional Development.

Not enough teachers are skilled at data analysis. Fewer are confident about how to change instruction based on what the data say. Professional development and time in the teaching day need to be built in for teachers to learn to analyze and use data effectively as well as plan intervention strategies and exchange ideas with others. This can help cultivate a culture of collaboration in schools. This culture of collaboration is essential to promoting shared accountability for student results.

9. Improve Transparency.

In order to build teacher buy-in and reduce teacher anxiety, teachers need to know:

- The standards that will be assessed and degree of complexity
- The dates of the assessments at the beginning of the school year
- The method and rubrics for grading assessments

This transparency will allow teachers to backward plan and have the greatest chance of promoting student success.

10. Involve Teachers in Assessment Re-design.

Teachers are immersed in creating assessments on a daily basis. They know best from classroom experience the types of assessments that can provide a valid picture of student understanding and learning growth.

In closing, we are very encouraged by Massachusetts' adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the participation in the Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) as a governing state. The goals PARCC has laid out for the design of a new assessment system address many of the concerns outlined herein.

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