Chapter 1

Assessment in School Today

What Is Assessment and Why Is It Changing?

Everyone needs information to plan. Doctors need information about patients to plan treatments. Investors need information to help you invest your money. And educators need information about students' achievement to help them learn. *Assessment* is the process of collecting information. In our schools, it is the process of collecting evidence of student learning. That evidence may focus on individuals or groups of students, and it may come from one or more sources. Tests are the best-known tools for collecting that information. But tests are only one tool. Student oral presentations, projects, student interviews, writing samples, performance assessments, teacher observation, portfolios, and student self-assessment can all serve to collect accurate information about student learning.

Much about assessment in schools remains the same as it has always been: students study for tests, teachers calculate grades, and some students fare better than others. But much about assessment in schools is changing, too, in response to major shifts in thinking about education.

What we want schools to do is changing. The school's mission used to be one of sorting students from the highest to the lowest achiever. This allowed schools to serve the social function of easing citizens into the various segments of our social and economic system. The student's goal was to finish as high in the rank order as possible. Today, high schools still use grade-point averages to rank students, but now we also ask schools to ensure the achievement of the largest possible number of students. Students are no longer just compared to each other to rank order them. Schools have now defined specific things students should know and be able to do. Assessment measures their ability to do those things. Each student's challenge is to meet these academic expectations, and the schools are to help every student do just that. It is this change in thinking about the mission of schools that underpins President Bush's mandate to "leave no child behind."

What we want students to know and be able to do is changing. What used to be the "basics" are no longer enough to function as a successful adult in our society. Participation in our nation's workforce requires a more complex web of basic skills, as well as skills beyond the basics. State and district learning goals increasingly reflect both knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in life beyond school. As a result, the assessment tools we use must be able to measure knowledge of the basics and skillful application of them. Assessments of these learning goals must also connect to life beyond school and

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therefore have changed to reflect situations in which such learning would be demonstrated.

We know more about testing and assessment. Traditionally, standardized tests have lacked depth. They have been designed to sample from a broad range of everything a student could know about a subject, but, for the most part, these tests haven't been designed to go deeply into students' understanding of specific content areas they have studied. Many standardized tests are limited by the multiple-choice format to measuring students' content knowledge and some reasoning patterns. As a result, a number of states and districts have developed their own standardized tests to probe more deeply into the skillful application of knowledge.

We have more information about uses of classroom assessment that bring about higher achievement. Assessment practices that encourage and improve learning have been around as long as education has been, but the education community has only recently had access to large numbers of studies that document their effectiveness. How many of us remember assessment from our school years as a joyful, exciting, productive, satisfying experience? It is likely that we remember multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks items, quizzes, and end of term exams that determine a final grade. We probably also recall feeling tense, anxious, or even fearful at times. Current research indicates that assessment doesn't have to be this way; it can be exciting, productive, and satisfying for teachers and students.

In understanding how assessment can function this other way, one of the challenges we face is our own past experiences being assessed in school, which may not have included assessment *for* learning. In the classroom, this kind of assessment seeks to inform students about themselves and their own learning, showing them exactly where they are in relation to the learning

targets their teachers have set, and with the help of their teachers, knowing which steps to take next. Tests have their place in the classroom, but if that is all the assessment that is going on, our teachers and children are missing a huge portion of the power of assessment.

All of these changes have combined to make assessment today different than what we as students experienced. They bring the potential for much more powerful learning environments than we experienced growing up. It is important to keep these changes in mind as we learn about current assessment practices and how to build positive assessment environments for our students.

What Is the Purpose of Assessment?

Even if you have no children in school today, it is easy to notice that whatever else is different, students take more tests these days. To understand why, we'll start by asking, *What is the purpose of assessment?*

Most misuses of assessments (and assessment dollars) arise from an incomplete or vague answer to this question. The purpose of all assessments can be stated in one sentence: *Assessments provide results to inform decisions.* The problems arise when we fail to think through clearly the following questions: *Who needs the information? What information do they need? What decisions will they make?* No assessment should be designed, selected, or given without the assessor first answering those questions. To understand why we have so many assessments, we need to explore the range of possible answers. Figure 1.1 shows the users of assessment information within a series of concentric circles, with those closest to the actual learning at the center.

Figure 1.1 Users of Assessment
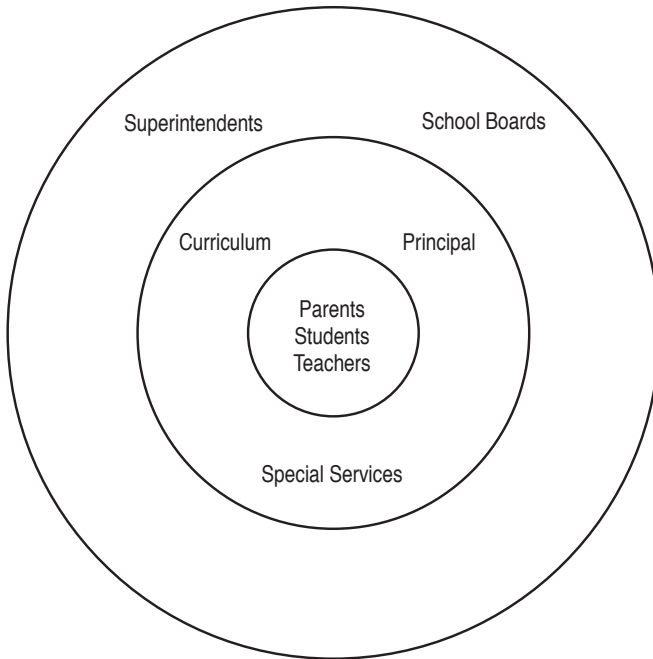
Who Needs Assessment Information?

Decision makers—Inner circle. Let's begin with those closest to the learning: parents and teachers. What kinds of decisions do they make? Parents use assessment information to decide what to do to support their child's learning, and teachers use it to assign report card grades. What other decisions do parents and teachers make on the basis of school assessment information? (Remember, assessment information can include test scores and grades, as well as written and oral comments from the teacher.) See how your thoughts compare to the decisions listed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Sample Decisions Made on the Basis of School Assessment Information—Inner Circle

PARENTS	TEACHERS
Is my child learning new things?	Are my students improving?
Is my child succeeding?	What does this student need?
Is my child keeping up?	What student strengths can I build on?
Is my child doing enough at home to succeed in school?	How should I group my students?
Is there a change I need to recommend for my child?	Am I going too fast, too slowly, too far, not far enough?
Are we doing enough at home to support learning at school?	Am I improving as a teacher?
Does the teacher know what my child needs?	Did that teaching strategy work?
Is this teacher doing a good job?	What shall I say at parent–teacher conferences?
Is this a good school? A good district?	What report card grade do I assign?

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What about students as decision makers? We almost never think of students as assessment users—most often we see them as the subjects of assessment. But what kinds of decisions do your children make based on assessment information?

Consider Andrea's experience with her long-term writing project in middle school. The teacher has graded it and handed it back, the words "garrulous and verbose" written at the top of the first page, along with many suggestions for improvement in the margins of the other pages. Andrea concludes she is not good at writing, and from now on, each time she has to write, it becomes harder. Andrea loves language, but hates writing.

How about Joe, who wants to be an architect? He takes Algebra II, but doesn't understand a number of the concepts taught and, even though he studies, performs poorly on test after test. He comes to believe that he is not good at math, and decides not to take any more math courses. When he realizes architecture requires more math, he concludes that he cannot become an architect.

Or Maria, a second-grade struggling reader. She receives accurate feedback about her progress, provided in a way that encourages her to keep learning. Her teacher tells her, "Here's what you are doing well and here's what we are going to work on next." Maria keeps at it because the assessment information she has received has led her to understand what good reading looks like and to see how she can get closer and closer to that goal.

Our children make crucial decisions daily, decisions that directly affect their own learning, based on assessment information coming from the teacher and the school. They decide whether they are succeeding, if they are improving over time, if they are capable of success, whether they like the subject, and whether they are going to continue learning. Their decisions are central to their learning. If they decide they are not capable of learning, if they decide to quit trying, no other decision maker, no matter the credentials, will be able to cause learning to happen. Students are the *most important decision makers* in the learning process (Table 1.2).

Decision makers—Middle circle. Less directly connected to the learning process, but still making decisions that affect the quality of schools are instructional leaders such as principals, curriculum directors, and special services directors. Table 1.3 samples some of the instructional support decisions they make. As you read through the list, notice how students' needs will not be met if our schools are unable to answer these questions.

Table 1.2 Sample Decisions Made on the Basis of School Assessment Information—The Heart of the Circle

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STUDENTS

Am I succeeding?

Am I improving over time?

Do I understand what it means to succeed in this subject?

Am I good at this subject?

Do I like this subject?

What should I do next to succeed?

What help do I need?

Am I in control of my success?

Does my teacher think I'm capable of success?

Is the learning worth the effort?

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Decision makers—Outer circle. Table 1.4 shows the policy makers who must have information about student learning as they make decisions to implement policies or laws and allocate resources. Notice that these decisions are also important to ensure that students' educational needs are met.

Decision makers—All circles. Taken together, all of these people use assessment information to make decisions that affect the learning of each student in our schools. Remove any one of them, or provide inaccurate or incomplete information, and learning will suffer.

Table 1.3 Sample Decisions Made on the Basis of School Assessment Information—Middle Circle

PRINCIPAL	CURRICULUM DIRECTOR	SPECIAL SERVICES EDUCATORS
Is this teacher producing results in the form of student learning? How can I help this teacher improve? Is instruction in our building producing results? Are our students prepared for college and the workplace? How shall we allocate building resources to help students succeed?	Is our program of instruction working? What adjustments do we need to make in our curriculum?	Who qualifies for special educational services? Is our program of services helping students? What assistance does this student need to succeed?

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Summative and Formative Decisions

These various decisions and decision makers need different kinds of information delivered in different ways and at different times to do their jobs. A helpful way to think about this collection of decisions is to conceive of them as serving either summative or formative purposes. *Summative* assessment reports on the status of learning at a point in time. We think of these as assessments *of* learning. *Formative* assessment, on the other hand, serves the purpose of tracking and promoting learning along the way—it is assessment *for* learning.

Table 1.4 Sample Decisions Made on the Basis of School Assessment Information—Outer Circle

SUPERINTEN-DENT	SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS	STATE DEPTS OF EDUCATION	CITIZENS & LEGISLATORS
Are our programs of instruction producing results in terms of student learning? Is each building principal producing results? Which schools deserve or need more resources?	Are our students learning and succeeding? Is our superintendent producing results?	Are programs across the state producing results? Are individual school districts producing results?	Are our students achieving in ways that prepare them to become productive citizens?

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Summative Assessment—Assessment of Learning

Summative assessment has as its main purpose to gather and report evidence of learning. It sums up the learning—it's a status report. It can take the form of a test at the end of a course given by a classroom teacher, a college admissions test, or a state- or district-mandated standardized test. All summarize student learning at the time of the assessment, and can help decision makers in certain ways. Much summative assessment is not intended to inform the classroom teacher about day-to-day instruction, or to help students become better learners. Rather, assessments *of* learning in the classroom most often are used to determine a grade. In some instances they are also

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used to help determine placement into specific instructional groupings, such as special education or gifted and talented programs. Summative assessments *of* learning can take the form of tests, quizzes, projects, performances, interviews, reports, oral presentations; in short, any method of assessment can be used summatively. Results can be reported in a number of ways:

- A letter grade (A, B, C, etc.)

- A percent correct (78%)

- A percentile (65th %ile)

- A grade-point average (3.1)

- Another alphabet letter representing progress toward a standard (E, M, P, etc.)

- A number (1, 2, 3)

- A word representing a stage on a developmental continuum

These symbols function as a shorthand way to communicate about student learning, but they only work if we understand exactly what they mean. In Chapters 5 and 6 we give more detail about each of these ways to report on achievement.

We also rely on assessments *of* learning to inform accountability decisions. They tell us how much students have learned, whether standards are being met, and if educators have done the job they were hired to do. Assessments *of* learning dominate resource allocation in testing and assessment. We conduct them routinely at local, state, national, and international levels. Over the last 50 years in the United States alone, we have invested billions of dollars to deliver these tests and to ensure the accuracy of the scores. Even so, controversy surrounding

these tests exists among community members, parents, and educators, which we will address later in this chapter.

Formative Assessment—Assessment for Learning

Assessment *for* learning occurs during teaching and learning as opposed to after it, and has ongoing improvement as its primary focus (Crooks 2001; Shepard 2001; Assessment Reform Group 1999). It uses day-to-day classroom assessment activities to involve students directly in their own learning, increasing their confidence and motivation to learn by emphasizing progress and achievement rather than failure and defeat (Stiggins 1999, 2001). Once students become involved, assessment *for* learning looks more like teaching than it does testing. It takes advantage of the power of assessment as an instructional tool that promotes learning rather than an event designed solely for the purpose of evaluating and assigning grades (Davies 2000). Teachers use assessment information formatively when they do such things as identify which concepts or skills students need more work with to plan further instruction; investigate the effectiveness of their own teaching practices; and provide regular feedback to students on their strengths and areas for improvement. Students engage in assessment *for* learning when they use assessment information to learn how to judge the quality of their own work and set goals for their own improvement. As you read Tables 1.5 and 1.6, notice that both categories of assessment are essential, in different ways, to a healthy educational environment.

The model of formative assessment we describe involves more than just assessing students more often. It goes beyond providing teachers with assessment results to revise instruction. In assessment *for* learning, both teacher and student use classroom assessment information to modify teaching and learning activities (Assessment Reform Group 1999).

Table 1.5 Key Differences

	ASSESSMENT *of* LEARNING	ASSESSMENT *for* LEARNING
REASONS FOR ASSESSING	Document individual or group achievement or mastery of standards; measure achievement status at a point in time for purposes of reporting	Increase achievement; to help students meet more standards; support ongoing student growth
TO INFORM	Others about students	Students about themselves
FOCUS OF ASSESSMENT	Achievement standards for which schools, teachers, and students are held accountable	Specific achievement targets selected by teachers that enable students to build toward standards
DRIVING FORCE	Accountability	Improvement
PLACE IN TIME	Event after learning is supposed to have happened	Process during learning

Table 1.6 Differences in Assessment Context

	ASSESSMENT *of* LEARNING	ASSESSMENT *for* LEARNING
PRIMARY USERS	Policy makers, program planners, supervisors, teachers	Students and teachers in partnership (coach guiding learner)
TYPICAL USES	Certify competence or sort students according to achievement for public relations, gatekeeper decisions, grading, graduation, or advancement	Help students see the target and how to hit it; help teachers diagnose and respond to student needs; help parents see progress over time
PRIMARY MOTIVATOR	Threat of punishment, promise of rewards	Belief that success is within reach with continued effort
TEACHER'S ROLE	Follow test administration procedures to ensure accuracy and comparability of results; use results to help students meet standards; interpret results for parents; teachers also build assessments for report card grading	Transform standards into classroom targets; inform students of targets; build assessments; adjust instruction based on results; involve students in assessment
STUDENT'S ROLE	Study to meet standards, take the test, strive for the highest possible score, avoid failure	Strive to understand the target; act on classroom assessment results to be able to do better next time

Teachers use assessment information formatively when they

- Pretest before a unit of study and adjust instruction for individuals or for the entire group

- Identify which students need more help

- Revise instruction based on assessment results

- Reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching practices

- Confer with students regarding their strengths and areas needing improvement

- Facilitate peer tutoring, matching students who demonstrate understanding with those who do not

Students use assessment information formatively when they

- Engage in self-assessment, accurately describing where they are in their learning and where they need to go next

- Watch themselves grow by monitoring their own progress

- Describe their learning and their growth to others

It isn't the method of assessment that tells us whether it is a formative or summative assessment. Many assessment methods—tests, quizzes, performance tasks, writing essays, and data gathered through observation of skills and products—can be used either way. How the results are used tells us if the assessment is formative or summative.

Although formative assessment in the classroom does not serve all of the decision makers or users of assessment data, we need to understand the central role it plays in promoting further learning. This form of assessment can motivate and guide stu-

dents in their progress, and help teachers gain the knowledge of each individual student in their class so as to focus instruction in specific ways.

Different Decisions, Different Assessments

So, why do we need classroom, school, district, state, national, and even international assessments? As we have shown, students need information about their learning to help them feel in control so they will keep trying. Teachers need information to see how to help students learn. School and district personnel need information to make programmatic and placement decisions. Policy makers need large-scale standardized testing information to make accountability decisions. Also, as states develop their own curriculum standards, many have developed companion assessment systems.

Here's the key point: one level or type of assessment will not necessarily provide the right kind of information for all of the decision makers listed above. That is why schools use a variety of assessments. How many assessments are needed for all purposes? Are we conducting too many assessments for certain needs and not enough for others? We believe that it is a good idea to ask, "Why so many?" if you think your school system is overtesting students. As your district or school responds, listen for an explanation of the *purpose* of each assessment—*who* will use the information and *what decisions* they will make on its basis. Is this clearly defined? Also listen for an explanation of *what kinds of learning* are measured on each assessment.

Testing for Accountability

The question "Why so many?" has another facet to it—the spike in large-scale standardized testing for accountability purposes. Today, political support for school accountability continues to rise at local, state, and national levels, fostered by the belief that increased large-scale testing will force improvement in the quality of our schools. As we showed earlier, these tests provide the information policy makers and educators need regarding the achievement of students and schools in order to make programmatic, instructional, and accountability driven decisions. They also allow comparisons to be made among students and among schools. In addition, standardized tests often serve as a foundation for the complex systems of sanctions and rewards applied in many districts and states across the country.

There are divergent views about the effectiveness of educational accountability testing in improving schools as well as about appropriate uses of the tests themselves. The issue is not accountability. That schools should publicly report their performance is beyond question in our minds; schools should provide evidence of how much and how well students are learning. If schools are failing the students they serve, it is right to compel those schools to improve.

The issue is whether large-scale standardized tests will improve learning. Some have argued that testing in this context is counterproductive, that it may actually widen the gap between successful and struggling students, instead of closing it. Some studies show that large-scale standardized testing has little impact on improving student learning (Shepard 2000). It is also a concern to some who believe that the tests are unfair to students in schools that are not capable of marshalling the financial resources that may be required to make the necessary improve-

ments. In this book, we do not enter the debate as to whether these tests are the right tools for the task. We do, however, believe the following about them: they are not an educational panacea. Effective as some believe they may prove to be when used as the fulcrum of accountability, tests by themselves will not succeed as the catalyst for producing a nation of high-performing schools.

Throughout this book we advocate for a companion approach to school improvement that we think needs to be present with large-scale accountability testing: assessment *for* learning. Research and experience argue strongly in favor of a national movement to use assessment to foster, not just to measure and grade, the achievement of every student. And, of all of the different decision makers and consumers of assessment results, the *student* must be considered the primary user of assessment information. This thinking is not yet the norm in classrooms and schools, but we think it should be. If we are sincere about wanting students to assume a level of responsibility for their own learning, they need to have information on which to act: information they understand; information that is accurate, immediate, and delivered in a way that encourages them to keep learning. Students who are actively involved in the assessment process learn from that experience and achieve at higher levels. Classroom practice aligns with research findings when teachers adopt a set of practices that puts student needs first and calls for strong student involvement in every facet of classroom assessment.

Assessment Literacy in the Schools

Because all of these uses of assessment are so crucial for student well-being, it is absolutely essential that assessment results—whether generated in the classroom or via external examination—be accurate. Any assessments our children take must meet certain standards of quality. Their developers must understand and apply those standards routinely. In other words, they must be *assessment literate*. Teachers and administrators who are assessment literate understand the difference between sound and unsound assessment, evaluation, and communication practices:

- They understand what assessment methods to use to gather dependable information about student achievement.

- They communicate assessment results effectively, whether using report card grades, test scores, portfolios, or conferences.

- They understand how to use assessment to maximize student motivation and learning by involving students as full partners in assessment, record keeping, and communication.

You may be surprised to learn that in a great many instances, neither teachers nor administrators have been trained to assess student achievement accurately, nor are they trained to interpret or use assessment results to maximize learning. Many have not been given the opportunity to learn, and therefore do not understand, the difference between sound and unsound assessment, evaluation, or grading practices. Neither are they aware of the principles of formative assessment, or assessment *for* learning. The research we'll describe in more detail in the next

chapter finds that these assessment practices, the key to raising student achievement, are largely absent in classrooms.

And so, while we as parents and community members assume that teachers and schools know what, when, and how to assess fairly and accurately, this is often not the case. Many teachers are aware of this and welcome the opportunity to learn more. The growing frequency and concurrent demands of account-ability-oriented state or local testing programs have resulted in local educators needing more than ever the knowledge and skill to use and to communicate evidence of learning in produc-tive ways. They also need to understand options in preparing their students for these tests other than superficial test-prep programs or outdated versions of state tests.

Teachers are caught in a situation that deserves our help and understanding. The dilemma they face is how to raise scores on state tests without sacrificing real learning in the classroom. It needs to be made clear to all who have a stake in improving education the critical role that classroom assessment, assess-ment *for* learning, can play in improving student performance on the standardized assessments *of* learning. And even though the best teachers and principals may work to balance both demands, without having a solid background in assessment lit-eracy it is not likely they will succeed.

Clearly this is a situation we must address if we are to avoid the real harm that can result from the inappropriate uses of standardized tests. It is a situation we must address if we are to realize the improved learning that can happen in every class-room where an assessment literate teacher applies the princi-ples of assessment *for* learning.

Chapter 1 — Important Ideas

- *Assessment* is the process of gathering evidence of student achievement.

- A variety of people need assessment information in schools today—at the classroom, school, and policy levels.

- The role of assessment in school improvement continues to grow toward greater reliance on standardized assessments *of* learning. However, assessments *for* learning offer greater promise of helping students succeed.

- Schools today are being held accountable for helping students meet standards, not merely sorting students into a rank order.

- All assessments need to provide accurate information about student achievement if they are to serve users well. For that to happen, all educators need to be assessment literate, understanding the principles of sound classroom assessment practice.

- We have used the majority of our assessment resources to fund standardized testing at the local, state, and national levels. The accuracy and power of classroom assessments, and consequently student learning, have suffered as a result.