

# **Have You Ever Wondered If Assessment and Accountability Are the Same Thing?**

*by the California Mathematics Council State Board*

The accountability movement in California has created a myriad of terms that people often find confusing. If ever there was an area in education that needs clarity it is that of assessment—especially as it relates to accountability. With the advent of sanctions and rewards based on the state’s accountability system, it is important to remind ourselves of the original purpose of assessment. “We assess student performance to improve education, determine success, and communicate results” (Carr and Harris 2001, 64). Quite simply, assessment is a tool to improve student learning and encompasses three broad stages: pre-assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment. Informed educators use these to develop a comprehensive assessment program to ensure the successful delivery of content to students throughout the school year.

## **Pre-assessment**

Pre-assessment identifies what the student already knows and is able to do (Carr and Harris 2001, 64). “It is a way to determine strengths and weaknesses in content oriented skills” (Harris and Hodges 1995, 59). This type of assessment is also known as diagnostic or entry level assessment. Informally, we have called this process that of “identifying prior knowledge. ” The information gained through pre-assessments is used in the development and implementation of instructional units. There are a variety of ways that teachers determine student ability:

- use of a diagnostic test appropriate to the content and standards that will be taught,
- use of a preliminary questioning process of students by teacher prior to a lesson,
- observation of students by teacher to determine readiness in an area, and
- use of past information on student performance.

## **Formative Assessment**

Once the baseline of student ability has been determined, it is time to use formative assessment. “Formative assessment provides

information throughout the teaching and learning process and guides instructional decisions, time allocation, and selection of learning tools and resources" (Carr and Harris 2001, 65). As educators we are in need of constant feedback as we insure students are learning and mastering the standards for the content we teach. If we cannot continuously monitor student progress, some students will be left behind while others could have been accelerated. Information gained through formative assessments helps us determine when to use an alternative approach, when to review previously learned material, when to focus on skills in isolation, and when to use an activity to synthesize learning.

The means for gathering this data can be informal or formal. Informally, a teacher may learn about student progress through observation, student interviews, reviewing homework, reading student journals, and through student self-evaluation. Formal methods of determining student progress may take the form of quizzes, tests with selected response or open-ended questions, portfolios, essays, and/or student presentations. Remember that the type of assessment used should reflect the objectives being taught. While it is often easy to use the end-of-chapter tests or publisher tests, it is only worthwhile to do so if the test matches the standard that was taught. Overreliance on a single type of formative assessment may give a compromised understanding of student progress. As stated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics: "To make effective decisions, teachers should look for convergence of evidence from different sources" (2000, 23).

### **Summative Assessment**

At some point, it is time to determine how much of the information students have learned. "Summative assessment is designed to provide an evaluation summary" (Allen, Noel and Rienzi 2001, 5). "It is a snapshot of student performance at a given point of time, judged to pre-established standards and criteria. Summative assessment typically leads to a status report on success or proficiency" (Carr and Harris 2001, 186). We often recognize this type of assessment as the end of unit test or as a "final." The most well known summative assessment in California is the STAR program.

It is hard to believe that through this testing vehicle we have moved from assessment of student knowledge to identification of "good" and "bad" schools. Is it appropriate to use a single test to make this type of determination? In every stage of assessment, educators are encouraged to use a variety of measures to determine student ability

and progress-does it make sense to do otherwise for a statewide test that has as its awesome responsibility the determination of whether public education is providing quality instruction to all students? "By failing to supplement standardized tests with richer, more meaningful alternatives, we unwittingly invite our communities to use only test scores to judge us" (Schmoker 1996, 70).

Currently schools have available a variety of data that could be used to determine an effective school program: use of benchmark tests, teachers' records of results on their own formative and summative assessments, student attendance, and graduation rates to name just a few. If the intent of assessment becomes that of evaluating school performance, then multiple measures must be used to justify the conclusions (see the 5th article in this series, [HYEWA5](#), *Have You Ever Wondered about The Use of Multiple Measures in Mathematics*, ComMuniCator, September 2002).

### **Assessment and Accountability**

Accountability is defined as "the idea that schools and teachers are responsible for educational outcomes and should be evaluated, traditionally through examination of students' test scores" (Harris and Hodges 1995, 3). Assessment focuses on improving instruction and reporting results of that instruction. Assessment creates the justification for accountability; therefore we must look at the full assessment opportunities given to students. It is a fine line, but assessment and accountability are not the same-they complement one another.

As our state moves forward in refining the accountability system for public education, the State Board of the California Mathematics Council continues to recommend a comprehensive assessment program that uses multiple measures to determine student progress. We also suggest caution in policy development in the following areas:

- High stakes testing programs can lead to devastating decisions for students that may jeopardize their progress in school. Retaining students or denying access to courses based on the results of a single, summative assessment is wrong.
- The identification of strong school programs must be based on an in-depth and comprehensive look at relevant data. It is wrong to use the results of a single, summative assessment to target teachers and schools for sanctions.

Accountability and assessment can work together to improve education for all students in our state. Input from educators and parents is critical in this process. Stakeholders need to be clear about the purpose of assessment and how it can be used in its many forms and stages to show the accountability we in education have to students and society.

### **Glossary of Terms**

- Student Interviews: A written or spoken answer to a question.
- Open Ended Question: A type of question used to explore a person's understanding of what is read or heard and intended to produce a free response rather than a directed one. A question that encourages divergent rather than convergent thinking.
- Free Response Test: A test in which one states answers in one's own words as in an essay examination rather than by selecting a given response as in a multiple-choice examination.
- Portfolio: A selected, usually chronological, collection of students' work that may be used to evaluate the learning process.

### **References**

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