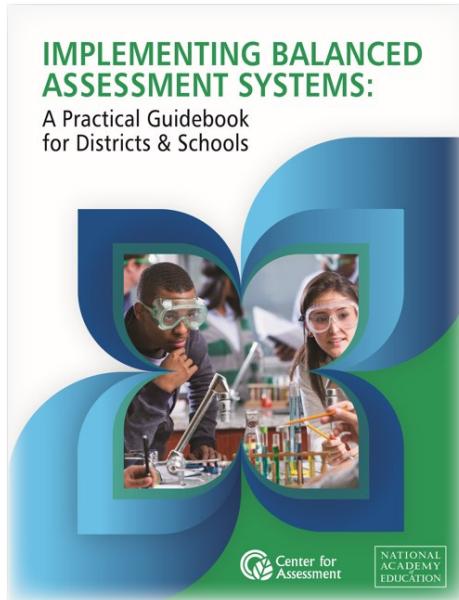




Does K-12 Testing Need a Tune-Up?



Too often, testing is off-kilter. It takes too much time, generates too little useful information, and leads to too many ineffective practices and mistaken conclusions.

In a [February 12th National Academy of Education \(NAEd\) webinar](#), [NEPC Fellow Scott Marion](#) of [The Center for Assessment](#) will join other testing experts and practitioners to help educators address these challenges by using an approach called “balanced assessment.”

Balanced assessment occurs when “the right assessments are used by the right users at the right time to make key decisions that either directly move student learning forward or move system structures and programs forward so they better support student learning,” according to [*Implementing Balanced Assessment Systems: A Practical Guidebook for Districts & Schools*](#).

Co-authored by Marion, the guide was published late last year by [NAEd](#), an honor society for education scholars that aims to use research to improve policy. It is a more practitioner-oriented version of a [longer report](#)

released in 2024.

The webinar—which is free to attend—includes both testing experts from the Center for Assessment, a nonprofit organization that aims to help districts and states use testing to improve learning and equity, as well as district leaders from Illinois, Michigan, and Texas. It will focus on practical solutions related to nine threats to balanced assessment identified in the practitioner guide.

Ahead of the webinar, here are the nine threats along with potential solutions designed to help districts and schools take a balanced and research-based approach to assessment.

Threat 1: Too much testing: Too much testing saps instructional time, overwhelms educators with more data than they can realistically use, and sometimes provides conflicting information that is difficult to interpret.

Solution: Awareness. Although there is no hard and fast rule about the “right” amount of time to spend testing, teachers and leaders may be unaware of how many hours students spend on this aspect of their education. Total time should be tabulated, taking into account that some student groups (e.g. multilingual learners) may take more tests than others. Once they know how much time testing really takes, stakeholders should consider whether some of that time might be better spent on other instructional priorities.

Threat 2: Redundant assessments: As new assessments are added, existing tests are not necessarily eliminated. As a result, students may be taking multiple tests that all measure the same thing.

Solution: Catalogue. List all assessments, considering whether some of them can be eliminated because they measure the same content and/or skills as others.

Threat 3: Unused results: Year after year, the results of some tests may be shelved for reasons such as a lack of capacity to absorb the data or the existence of duplicative data.

Solution: Ask. Request examples of ways in which testing data has

been useful or informative. If none can be found, consider eliminating the test—or starting to use the data in the way it was intended.

Threat 4: Mismatch: This is one of the most common assessment challenges. Good assessments are purposefully designed to be used in specific ways. Using them for alternative purposes may lead to inaccurate conclusions. Sometimes this occurs because vendors make over-inflated claims about the range of valid uses for assessments. Other times, educators may have forgotten or failed to fully understand intended uses.

Solution: Research. Educators should make sure they understand the purpose for which their assessments were designed and then restrict their use to that purpose.

Threat 5: Assuming all tests can guide instruction: This threat is a particularly common variant of Threat 4. For a variety of reasons, educators may try to inform instruction with the results of tests intended to monitor the health of a school, district, or state. This can lead to unintended consequences such as narrowing the curriculum to focus exclusively on tested content.

Solution: Collect information. Ask teachers how they are using assessments to guide instruction.

Threat 6: Assessment use is not consistent with instructional vision: This often occurs because the tail is wagging the dog. In other words, the content and format of an assessment (often one that is designed to measure the efficacy of the school or district) determines rather than supports instruction. For example, multiple choice formats are common on state assessments associated with high stakes for districts and schools. But this format is not ideal for capturing progress toward many common instructional goals, such as critical thinking or deep levels of understanding.

Solution: Compare and contrast. What is the instructional mission and vision for a district or school? To what extent do the formats and content of existing assessments align with and support this vision? When assessment is balanced, testing and instruction fit together seamlessly with one guiding and supporting the other.

Threat 7: Policies and politics that distort practice: Policies and rules about assessments often have unintended consequences. For example, policies that require teachers to grade every piece of student work can lower the odds that the results will be used as feedback that leads to the ongoing improvement of learning or instruction.

Solution: Evaluate. Given the frequency with which policies create unintended consequences, educators should evaluate these rules on an ongoing basis. This means going beyond reviewing topline data by collecting information on how teachers are interpreting and implementing the guidelines in their classrooms, with the goal of changing policies that try to solve one problem but end up creating another.

Threat 8: Overemphasizing summative assessments: Especially when stakes are high, educators and students may focus too much on summative assessments such as annual statewide exams. While these tests can provide policymakers with information on the status of a district, state, or school, they are not designed to guide learning or instruction on a daily basis. When used this way, they can have the effect of narrowing the curriculum and stunting learning.

Solution: Messaging. Understand how teachers perceive and interpret the role of summative assessments. Explicit or implicit messaging—real or perceived—that summative assessments are the only things that matter can lead to a narrow focus on test prep that does not serve learning visions and goals.

Threat 9: Underemphasizing formative assessment's role: Research suggests that formative assessments have a positive impact on learning because they help teachers understand progress toward learning goals while also helping to identify where students need more (or less) help at a specific point in time. Pressure to improve performance on summative assessments can lead teachers to neglect these practices. Educators may also mistakenly conflate summative practices (such as reviewing scores on state exams) with formative practices designed to inform learning and instruction.

Solution: Educate and message. Ensure teachers have the knowledge they need to use formative assessment to guide instruction. Re-

viewing student work with colleagues can help teachers learn to collect evidence that guides instruction by identifying areas where their students need more help at different stages of their learning journeys. Students themselves should be aware of learning goals so they can monitor their own progress, and implement feedback. Leaders should also clearly signal the importance of formative assessment, eliminating messaging that either intentionally or unintentionally encourages teachers to neglect formative practices.

NEPC Resources on Assessment

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, sponsors research, produces policy briefs, and publishes expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. NEPC publications are written in accessible language and are intended for a broad audience that includes academic experts, policymakers, the media, and the general public. Our mission is to provide high-quality information in support of democratic deliberation about education policy. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence and support a multiracial society that is inclusive, kind, and just. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>