

Using Assessment to Raise Standards

by Bambi Betts

Over the past decade, major strides have been made in our understanding of the role of assessment and student achievement; there are at least five key learnings; these provide the basis for a compelling set of tools for principals or other instructional leaders. Here we translate these learnings into tools for instructional leaders:

Learning #1: Require all major assessments to be prepared before a unit of study is taught and shared with students. Assessment tools are the means by which both teachers and students understand what is the essential learning from a unit of study. When both the teacher and the learner begin the learning process with a clear vision of what will form evidence of learning, both increase the possibility of high achievement. The teacher avoids the common gap between what she teaches and eventually assesses; the student focuses his learning on the essential skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to successfully perform the task. Preparing the assessment ahead of teaching provides the teacher with a much higher level of assurance that the assessment task will be compelling evidence of student achievement of the desired learning.

#2: Ensure that there is at least one contextual assessment for each unit of study. Traditionally, we have sought evidence of student learning through administering secret, often timed, tests of recall and basic understanding. Indeed, there remain student outcomes that are best assessed this way. But there is an ever-increasing set of student learning outcomes that is not so easily assessed through these means. How do we know if a student sees the connection between facts and skills, and where they are actually used as needed? How can we be more certain that learning is not simply a collection of isolated skills and bits of information?

The lessons of the past decade point clearly to the need for and power of what I call the "contextual assessment." This is a task that assesses student achievement of multiple outcomes through a task that is suggested by the outcomes themselves and that simulates a product or process or performance in the real world. The design challenge is to remove ourselves from the box of "school tasks" and begin to assess students "in context." There is now compelling evidence that students who are regularly assessed contextually retain more of their learning for longer.

There is also clear evidence that, in order to perform such tasks at a high level, students can benefit from a clear comprehensive breakdown of what it takes to acquire the desired knowledge and skill and to perform the tasks well. Enter practice number three.

#3: Ensure that teachers provide clear criteria to achieve excellence at a task from the beginning of the learning process. All too often, teachers are disappointed by the results of an assessment, apart

from the one or two students who managed to guess more accurately the standard of work the teacher desired for all learners. This disappointment is most often caused by failing to communicate to students what "excellence" at a particular task means.

Students are, by definition, learners. They need to practice with criteria, not guess what they are. If the task is to write an editorial for a local paper, provide students with a list of the elements which characterize an excellent editorial; and insist that teachers search for and include those elements which are most essential to the task (in this case, facts which support the point of view, persuasive language and compelling arguments). And students need these criteria right from the beginning, not the "day of the test." We get better performance when the learner knows the criteria from the beginning. Imagine providing teachers with the criteria for their annual evaluation only at the end of the year. We repeatedly do this to our students.

An ever more effective way to promote high student achievement through the assessment process forms practice #4.

#4: Ensure that teachers provide "real" models of excellence. Suppose you are charged with the task of designing a web page for your school. What is one of the first things you might do? Search for outstanding examples of web pages you would seek as excellent "real" models of the task. The chances of your producing an excellent web page go way up, once you have viewed excellent models.

Students faced with an assessment task benefit in the same way. The criteria for excellence become meaningful and much more achievable when translated into real models to set the standard. And don't fret over "creativity"; many teachers fear that if they show models of excellence, it will stifle creativity. The simple solution is to make it one of the criteria. Remember, students are learners on a journey, not experts. Fill your classroom with excellent samples of the kinds of things your curriculum describes for your students.

Both formal research and action-research by individual teachers have uncovered a range of critical practices in assessment.

It is no secret that the principal is the key ingredient in mobilizing a faculty to rapidly improve practice toward improving student achievement. And the assessment "tool box" is the most powerful source available.