



Through Students' Eyes

Students' Perceptions of
Assessment Practices

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Students' Perceptions of Assessment

Preface

A compelling opportunity presents itself to educators. It requires us to alter two things –the way we view assessing learning and the role of students in the assessment process. Such a shift of mindset holds the potential to dramatically influence learning. Changing our minds and our practices are connected. The investigation described in this report is one step to illuminate the potential educators have to impact student learning through our will and skill.

The Idaho State Department of Education began an initiative in 2013 that included professional development to build knowledge in the use of effective assessment practices. As part of that initiative, an inquiry was conducted into how students perceive assessment and its influence on their learning. The following report summarizes the research rationale for the re-orientation of our assessment practices and presents students comments about the process and practices that they experience in their schools related to assessment.

The timing is ripe as educators retool to teach to different standards and perfect the pedagogy that supports higher cognitive demand. The skillful use of assessment practices to influence teaching and learning on a day-to-day basis is a high leverage strategy in the implementation of these new standards. This summary is one step in that pursuit.

A View from the Their Desks



"We care about learning a lot. We want go to college and use everything-in life."

Student

"I like to see my progression of learning stuff."

Student

"A teacher took our feedback and changed and is so much more helpful now."

Student

"Tests aren't everything."

Student



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students are the intended beneficiaries of educational reform solutions. Yet rarely are they asked in meaningful ways about their perceptions of the effects of these solutions on their learning. Educators and policy makers are answerable to many stakeholders. This investigation centers on the primary group of stakeholders – students.

This investigation was a component of an initiative to develop professional capabilities in formative assessment practices. The initiative was a feature within the Schoolnet program funded by the Idaho State Legislature and the J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation. The question of interest was, what can students tell us about their experiences with tests, preparation for tests, and effect of taking tests on their learning? Focus groups were used to elicit more detailed responses and allow investigators to probe based on those responses.

The process and the report used a framework borrowed from the work of Rick Stiggins and associates that volunteer districts were learning through professional development provided by the Idaho State Department of Education. The intention was to provide a consistent and coherent approach to solicit and organize student comments that would facilitate action.

Students revealed a variety of viewpoints from their lens. As we dug deeper, we learned that students' attitudes toward tests could inform teaching and learning. As informative as their remarks are, the process of asking students for their feedback is also a lesson to be learned and a valuable tool for innovations in our schools. The findings are summarized below.

KEY 1 PURPOSE FINDINGS

1. The most frequent assessment experience described by students is as a culminating event—a test.
2. Students cite teachers more frequently as users of tests than themselves.
3. The predominant purpose of tests is to obtain a grade, verification of achievement and decision making by teachers.
4. The use of testing beyond a required state or national test varies by teacher.



KEY 2 CLEAR LEARNING TARGETS FINDINGS

1. Communicating what students are learning depends upon the teacher.
2. Many comments suggest that students cannot articulate what they are learning. Their comments reflected confusion between the activity they were to complete and a specific skill or information they were learning.
3. Use of clear learning targets, so that students understand them, is not widely used across the sites in this study. Consistent use of learning targets and goal setting is used by one site and described consistently and favorably by those students.

KEY 3 SOUND DESIGN FINDINGS

1. Students are most familiar with multiple choice responses.
2. Students articulate their preferences, their test taking strategies, and the reasons for their preferences.
3. Testing, assessing, and grading practices vary from class to class.

KEY 4 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FINDINGS

1. Grades are the primary feedback to students, and most work that students do is graded.
2. Students describe in detail the type of feedback that they value and why they value it.
3. The use of descriptive feedback varies from teacher to teacher and is valued by students when it is given.
4. Time with teachers is important to students.
5. Parents and students have access to information regarding grades and assignments, yet regular use of these mechanisms varies.



KEY 5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT FINDINGS

1. Students identify which components of assessment support or hinder their learning.
2. Students cite the variation across teachers related to all aspects referenced.
3. The psychological safety shaped by teachers is an important condition for learning.
4. There is a clear emotional element for students before, during, and after testing experiences that has an impact on their dispositions as learners.

The findings are interrelated as are the features in the *Keys to Quality Assessment Framework*. We learn that students use summative tests the least. Results are communicated through grades or proficiency determinations and they speak more to how others use the results, acknowledging that is too late for them to do anything about it. Their remarks give us valuable insight into what they find to be effective teaching strategies and cite those approaches that make it more challenging to learn. Students frequently mention that teaching, testing, and dispositional attributes vary from classroom to classroom, suggesting that students must negotiate the variables continually throughout their day. Students from one of the participating schools, however, consistently mentioned assessment strategies, routines, and practices that were used across teachers, across grades, and clearly united them as a school.

Many ideas might be generated from this report and the potential that students' comments hold. It is hoped that that is exactly what happens. A few proposals are made all of which are within the control of the local educational agency to pursue.

1. **Seek student voice.** Students are the primary beneficiaries of education. Two simple questions can be used by teachers to cultivate a safe, trusting relationship and provide insight from a view from the desks of students: *What things do I do that help you to learn and what things do not help you to learn?* The responses can provide just in time responses, allow for mid-course adjustments, or reflective action—just as formative assessment practices might impact students.
2. **Use formative assessment strategies in the classroom to support students through learner-centered action, ownership, and motivation.** Learning is a natural, yet complex human



activity. The variables that really make a difference to learning have been made explicit in the research. Educators need to apply that research through knowledge, practice to perfect different pedagogy, and willingness to engage the student in ways that empower them to be the primary actors on their learning. The use of assessment strategies *for* learning has the potential to fundamentally change the culture of the school. To support this practice in schools, leaders need to make it a priority, not as a mandate but as a process of learning about the whys and how to's of formative assessment so that it becomes a matter of conviction, not compliance. Individual teachers can change the culture of their classrooms through formative assessment routines, rituals and strategies. Only the leader is positioned to influence the culture of the entire school.

3. **Communicate information to all users of current assessment instruments with intention and accuracy.** Tests and grades will likely continue to be a staple of schooling. A question for educational leaders and teachers to ask is: *How have we messaged what these mean?* Messages are communicated by intention or default. Is this a potential area of improvement for schools?
4. **Invest in the development of growth mindsets in our students.** Shaping a student's positive self-esteem is something that effective educators do all the time. Academic achievement cannot happen if students do not believe in themselves. They must expect that they are capable learners to persevere through those moments where learning is just hard. Engaging in courageous conversations regarding how educators and schools can make deliberate efforts to develop a sense of efficacy in learners is a move that can matter.

It is hoped that this investigation sparks local efforts to use formative assessment strategies to fundamentally and authentically connect students to their learning in ways that traditional habits of schooling has failed to do.



Introduction

An enduring feature of schooling has been testing. Acquiring knowledge and skill includes the need to verify the extent to which competencies have been acquired. Examinations serve to authenticate and confirm the extent to which what was taught was actually learned. Such culminating events, assessments *of* learning, continue to take center stage in K-12 classrooms. Undoubtedly, examinations will continue to be an essential tool of quality control of formal learning systems. As essential as these instruments are in the current policy environment, tests are insufficient to influence the very outcome that they measure. The focus of this report is the use of assessment practices that influence learning while teachers and students can do something about it, assessment *for* learning.

The next chapter of standards based education can take a different path for the next generation of students if we transform our practice. While summative tests verify levels of student performance, educators must seize this opportunity to put as much or more attention to the use of assessment practices that patently impact student learning (Heritage, 2010). In this report, students tell us those things that influence their learning. Their comments parallel research. It is time to use both research and student voice with skillful intention.



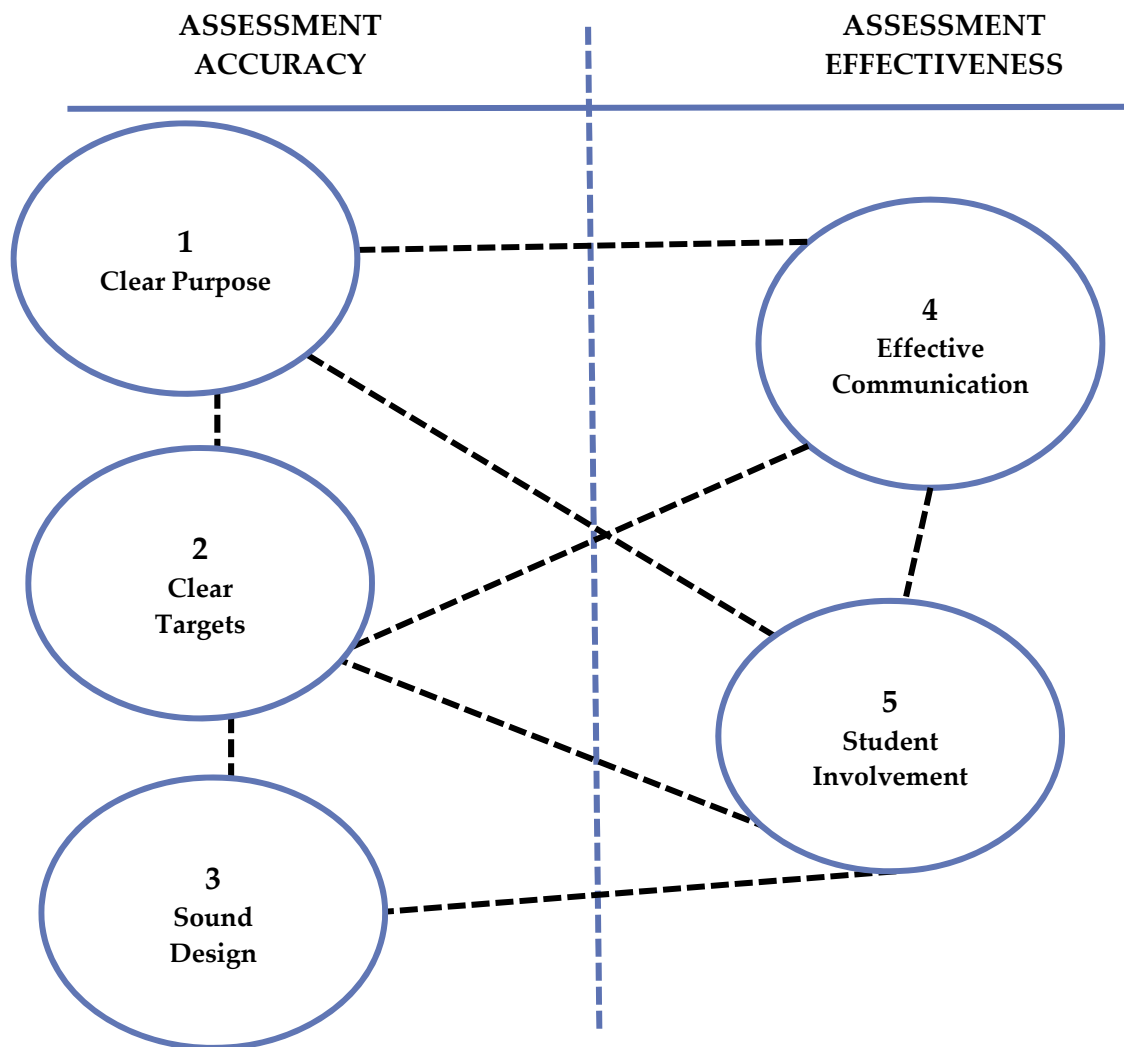
The core problem lies in the false, but nonetheless widespread, assumption that formative assessment is a particular kind of measurement instrument, rather than a process that is fundamental and indigenous to the practice of teaching and learning.

Margaret Heritage, 2010

SECTION ONE: A FRAMEWORK

A framework helps us conceptualize the thinking behind a practice. The framework below illustrates components of assessment literacy and their interdependencies. Understanding and applying aspects of quality assessment is at the core of responsible professional practice. Deeply understanding the concepts behind the practice separates the expert from the novice. The framework below, in Figure 2.1, provides a structure for us to develop expertise in using quality assessment practices. The *Keys to Quality Assessment* were used in the professional development provided by the Idaho State Department of Education during the 2012-2013 school year and are described below (Chappuis, J., Stiggins, R., Chappuis, S., Arter, J., 2012).

Figure 1.1 KEYS TO QUALITY ASSESSMENT
(Chappuis, J., Stiggins, R., Chappuis, S., Arter, J., 2012)





There is an increase in other worthy frameworks which can guide assessment practices. However, the most important are the elements therein, the interdependence of those elements, and the systematic translation of the framework into practice.

Clear Purpose

Why do we test? Who are the beneficiaries of a test? Clarity of purpose is a prerequisite condition to the effective use of assessments.

“We assess for two reasons: (1) to gather evidence to inform instructional decisions and (2) to encourage students to try to learn. Both purposes must be well served for schools to be effective.” (Stiggins, 2008.)

Three key questions are offered by Chappuis, et al. (2012) to clarify the purpose and use of an assessment:

1. *Who* will use the information?
2. *How* will they use it?
3. What *information*, in what detail, is required?

The purpose of assessing is often tacit, assumed and too often unexpressed to students, leaving them to conclude the purpose on their own as their comments reflect. A lack of clarity to students sets up conditions for detachment and a passive disposition toward their influence on their own learning. When the purpose is not clear, the information that the assessment yields can be misused or underused.

Assessments as an instrument and assessment as embedded strategies in the teaching process have different aims. When purpose is well-defined, it should influence decisions made by teachers regarding assessment design, use, and users. Obvious users of assessment are students. Yet, as we will see in their comments, most students convey the purpose of tests in narrow ways.

When the purpose of either an assessment instrument or an assessment strategy is clear to the teacher, it can be clearly communicated. For the purpose to be meaningful to students, they must be able to articulate what they are learning – a clear learning target.



Clear Learning Targets

Two foundational sources of ambiguity for students are the purpose of an assessment and what they are learning. A learning target is the specific knowledge or skill that students are to learn. It is not a teaching objective or a work activity in which the student will engage to support the intended learning. What students are to learn based on standards or written curriculum needs to be communicated in ways that they can understand, articulate and act upon.

Chappuis, et al. (2012) present these questions for educators to use:

1. Are learning targets clear to teachers?
2. What kinds of achievement are to be assessed?
3. Are these learning targets the focus of instruction?

Examples of Teaching Objectives, Student Learning Targets, and Work Activity

Teaching Objective: Students will cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Student Learning Target: I can define textual evidence or "word for word" support. I can locate and cite textual evidence to support my analysis of what the text says.

Work Activity: Re-read Chapter 10, in *Counting on Grace* and complete the worksheet with your study partner.

Having clear learning targets means that both the teacher and the student know specifically what they are to understand, problem-solve, or demonstrate. If that is not clear to either the teacher or the learner, unintended consequences can occur. The more visible, obvious, and understandable the intended learning is to students, the more they can be guided to monitor their own learning.

This may appear to be simply a matter of semantics at first glance. It is a shift that makes an important distinction for students. They understand why they are doing the tasks before them. They see them as a means rather than an end – to turn something in so they can get a grade. They internalize and self-assess their progress toward the learning target.

Sound Design

Precise learning targets are prerequisite to the design of both assessment instruments and assessment strategies. Other than for standardized tests, the quality of an assessment experience is typically left to teachers or text book publishers. Competency in designing assessments has not been emphasized in traditional teacher preparation programs (Stiggins, 2008.) Apart from the summative test produced by the state, assessment instruments are most frequently designed by individual or groups of teachers in their school or district or available



within purchased resources that they have. Selecting assessment tools or methods is a strategic decision. The strategic decisions facing teachers and administrators lie in responses to these questions (Chappuis, J, et al. 2012):

1. Do assessment methods match learning targets?
2. Do the sample items represent learning appropriately?
3. Are items, tasks, and scoring rubrics of high quality?
4. Does the assessment control for bias?

If the purpose of the assessment practice is to collect evidence that students understand a particular concept and the learning target was clearly communicated to and understood by the student, then the method must be suited for the type of target for which evidence is collected. Educators need to be purposeful in the design of both instruments and strategies to reliably observe learning that reflects what was taught and how it will be tested.

Effective Communication

Assessments yield information. The information from assessments should be related to its intended purpose and communicated to intended users in effective ways. If the purpose is not obvious and explained to the users, the data yielded could be misunderstood and misapplied. For students as a primary user, the communication must be meaningful to them. If they understand the assessment is to check the progress they are making toward the learning target, they will then view assessment as a typical feature of a learning process, rather than event. When grades are the dominant form of feedback, students are getting more communication about what they earned, not necessarily what they learned. Without precise information to know what they mastered, what they misunderstood, what they did correctly and what they did not, the students who get A's will continue to get A's and the students who get D's will continue to get D's.

Using assessment strategies embedded in teaching communicates information upon which action can be taken by both the teacher and the student. Developing know-how in collecting, analyzing, and conveying information by the most important users of assessment – teachers and students - is at the core of the shift in formative assessment practice. The evidence of the impact of feedback is becoming increasingly apparent. Engagement of students begins when the learning task is clear and they have meaningful feedback so they know what they have to do next to correct or continue their learning. The culture in a classroom needs to be psychologically safe where making mistakes is viewed as something to be expected, rather than avoided. Effective communication meaningfully informs and encourages students at all levels of achievement.



As important as specific information is to the learning process for students, we should not underestimate the emotional aspects of assessment. Students will fill in gaps of information with their own conclusions. These conclusions will be influenced by past practices, their prior experiences, and their mindset about their own expectations of themselves. For the eager learner, anxiety around assessment may center on their desire to maintain an A average. For the reluctant or disengaged learner, the assessment experience may implicitly communicate that they endure yet another experience they believe they cannot do. The effects of assessment on students' expectations of themselves as effective learners is something that well-delivered formative assessment practices can shape in positive ways. It requires intentional and descriptive information on which the student can act.

Student Involvement

If students understand the purpose of an assessment practice, they can ably articulate what they are learning, and they can understand how to use the evidence provided, they are authentically more involved in their own learning. Imagine or recall pursuing something you wanted to learn as a beginner - a hobby, golf, a new language, playing the piano, etc. Now imagine that your instructor does not tell you what you will be learning at each lesson. You have to figure it out. Suppose you are asked to do a variety of tasks but you are not told why or how it will help you learn what you need to learn. You try to figure it out. Then imagine that each time you do one of these tasks, you receive a grade but you are not sure how the instructor arrived at that decision and it is the only feedback you receive. Now consider how these practices influence your drive, motivation, and interest to pursue this activity.

People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning.

W. Edwards Deming

Increasing the engagement of students in the classroom has been the focus of many school improvement plans. There are countless books, trainings, and suggestions that offer useful ideas to engage children in their learning. At the core of this essential feature is the motivation of students and what schooling does to nurture or hinder it. Important questions for educators to consider might be:

1. Do students have an understanding of what the learning target is? Do they know what *good work* looks like?
2. Do students know where they are at any given moment in their progression towards mastery?
3. Have the next steps for students been well-defined so that they understand and can accomplish it?

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4. Is the level of challenge sufficient enough for progress yet not such a stretch that it defeats the spirit?

The more that students know what they are supposed to learn, what quality work looks like, where they are and how to continue progressing, the more likely they will be engaged in ways that nourish their internal motivation. Minimizing the extent to which one has to guess about how to progress in the pursuit of something is an obvious expectation for adults. It applies to children as well.

These keys to quality assessment are interdependent, each influencing the other. When educators understand these concepts and integrate them in practice, students learn more than the content they are taught. They learn the power of being the critical actor on their learning.



SECTION TWO: A RATIONALE FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The research reviewed in this section is limited to areas related to formative assessment. Stiggins (2008) made a distinction between summative as assessment *of* learning and formative as assessment *for* learning, emphasizing the difference in purpose as described in the previous section. Experts in the field of assessment debate the definition of formative assessment, but one is borrowed from Wiliam (2011) for the purposes of this summary:

When the cook tastes the soup,
that's formative; when the
guests taste the soup, that's
summative.

Robert Stake

An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in the absence of that evidence

Moving away from a traditional view of assessing as giving tests is central to this definition. Earl (2003) further suggests assessing *as* instruction in which the role of the student fundamentally shifts from passive to active. Students become their own assessors using strategies that enable them to monitor and manage their own learning with guidance and coaching from the teacher. Earl summarizes the purposes and differences in each type of assessment in Figure 2.1. The opportunity that new standards and new summative evaluations bring provides an optimal time to use all of these appropriately.

Figure 2.1 Features of Assessment *of*, *for*, and *as* Learning (Earl, 2003)

Approach	Purpose	Reference Points	Key Assessor
Assessment <i>of</i> Learning	Judgments about placement, promotion, credentials, etc.	Other students	Teacher
Assessment <i>for</i> Learning	Information for teachers' instructional decisions	External standards or expectations	Teacher
Assessment <i>as</i> Learning	Self-monitoring and self-correction or adjustment	Personal goals and external standards	Student

The accumulating research on the impact of the skillful use of formative assessment practices on learning is decisive. Ignoring this evidence is analogous to ignoring the benefits of medical



treatments that have better results over others. The evidence and the elegant simplicity of students' points of view inspire changes to our practice.

Learn the Know-Why Before the Know-How

Let us not underestimate the challenge of changing practice. Developing expertise in an area is a process, not an event. Abandoning long standing instructional habits is not simple, nor quick.

One does not become skillful at playing tennis after listening to someone talk about how to play tennis. Getting on the court and playing a lot, being coached with effective feedback from someone with more expertise, and acting on that feedback makes one a better tennis player. Acquiring new information through professional development events is an essential first step, but it remains inadequate as a sole strategy to make what we hear visible in practice.

Leaders must create the conditions for the staff to progress along a continuum of competence – safely. Perseverance toward mastery must replace the premature abandonment of the proven over the next popular idea.

“Statements without evidence are just opinions. There are too many of those in education and that’s what’s got us into trouble. It’s the interpretation of evidence that matters.”

John Hattie
Evans Interview 2012

Using assessment to both measure learning *and* to shape learning require different types of knowledge, an open mindset, and new eyes on the roles of students in their learning. Both opinion and evidence have long been available regarding formative assessment as integral to quality teaching.

In 1969, Benjamin Bloom offered this point of view, as quoted by Wiliam (2011):

“Quite in contrast is the use of “formative evaluation” to provide feedback and correctives at each stage in the teaching-learning process. By formative evaluation, we mean evaluation by brief tests used by teachers and students as aids in the learning process. While such tests may be graded and used as part of the judging and classificatory function of evaluation, we see much more effective use of formative evaluation if it is separated from the grading process and used primarily as an aid to teaching.

Studies done by Fuchs, et al. revealed that assessing learning two to five times per week produced a substantial increase in student learning when there was specific action in response to the assessment. In cases where follow up action was pre-planned and when teachers used graphs to illustrate growth to students, there were two to three times greater student gains (Fuchs, L. and Fuchs, D. 1986.)



Black and Wiliam (1998) studied 250 relevant studies and found that formative assessment practices accounted for a .4 to .7 effect size which suggests a possible increase between 16-26 percentile points on tests, with largest gains for struggling learners. They further concluded from this meta-analysis that improving learning through assessment depends on five factors:

1. The provision of effective feedback to students.
2. The active involvement of students in their own learning.
3. Adjusting teaching to take into account results of assessment.
4. The recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of students.
5. The need for students to be able to self-assess and understand how to improve.

A two-year study of the science of learning resulted in the seminal book, *How People Learn*, published in 1999. The account of this study is especially germane at this time of implementation of the Idaho Core Standards. This summary isolates one finding in particular: Learners monitor their own understanding through thinking about their own thinking. Learners do this regardless of a teacher's intentional teaching of metacognitive strategies. The problem of practice lies in the fact that teachers may be unaware of what students are thinking about their learning *while* they are learning something. The implication for assessment is that

frequent formative assessments help both teachers and students monitor progress and that assessments need to be learner-friendly, that is, they are not the Friday quiz for which information is memorized the night before, and for which the student is given a grade that ranks him or her with respect to classmates. (National Research Council, 1999)

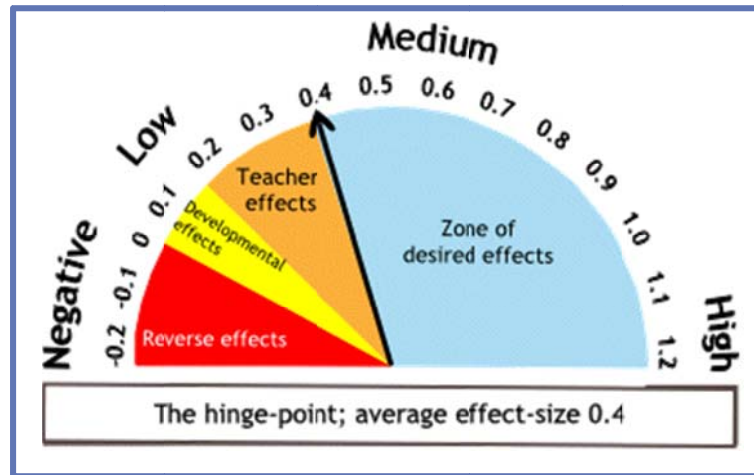
More recently, there is additional evidence for educators to internalize. John Hattie's research (2009) is gaining increasing attention internationally. He evaluated more than eight hundred meta-analyses which included 52,637 individual studies, with the interest in determining what really works in education based on evidence. What he found was that a lot of things work. The larger finding however was that some things work much better than other things and the author suggests that educators need to focus on those elements. The findings of this study deserve more attention beyond this report. Only specific findings that influence the use of formative assessment practices are emphasized here.

Hattie (2009) used effect size to determine the impact of 138 different variables on student achievement. Of the 138 factors, the researcher illustrated a range of impact from a negative influence of -.34, to a positive result of 1.44. An effect size of one ($d=1.0$), suggests an increase of one standard deviation on student achievement. Advancing one standard deviation for a student could mean a two to three year gain for students receiving a particular treatment. Given the number of treatments investigated, Hattie proposed a method to interpret the impact.



Treatments that had an effect size of .4 or higher are viewed as having a positive impact on learning, which Hattie calls *the zone of desired effects*, as illustrated in Figure 3.2. An effect size from zero to .39 is still considered to have impact but of less strength.

Figure 2.2 Zone of Desired Effects (Hattie, 2009)



Of the 66 treatments that fell within the zone of desired effects, this report calls attention to those practices related to formative assessment practices illustrated in Figure 3.3 below.

Figure 2.3 Effect Size and Rankings of Influences Related to Assessment Practices (Hattie, 2009)

	Ranking of 138	Effect Size	Influence on Student Achievement
Related to Attitude & Mindset	1	1.44	Self-report grades
	11	.72	Teacher – Student Relationships
	14	.67	Prior achievement
	51	.48	Motivation
	50	.48	Concentration/persistence/engagement
	60	.43	Self-concept
	66	.40	Reducing anxiety
Related to Practice	3	.90	Formative assessment
	10	.73	Feedback
	34	.56	Goals

The above variables all fall within the zone of desired effects, indicating that all of them demonstrated positive

These results lend further support to social cognitive theory, specifically that affective, cognitive, and environmental variables interact in a reciprocal fashion to determine human behavior.



effects. Several of the above elements are dispositional, relating to the psychosocial, emotional conditions created in the learning setting. Others are specific instructional practices. In theory, the factors are isolated. In practice, they are interdependent.

The number-one variable, self-report grades ($d=1.44$), refers to students' conclusions about their own performance. High school students were found to have accurate understandings of their achievement levels across all subjects. Their predictions of anticipated success are most often based on their past academic performance. Prior achievement ($d=.67$) and a student's perception of his or her ability were found to be reliable predictors of success – from the early years of schooling through job performance. Other studies reviewed suggest a relationship between a student's self-concept ($d=.43$) and achievement levels and the reciprocal nature of the relationship. Studies suggested that motivation is another related factor to students' attitudes towards their learning ($d=.48$.) Motivation is at its highest when students are competent, have sufficient autonomy, set worthwhile goals, get feedback, and are affirmed by others.

Hattie (2009) suggests that developing a positive attitude toward school work may be a disposition to greater engagement. The effects of concentration on tasks, engagement in the work, and persistence in the challenge were closely related ($d=.48$.) Reducing sources of anxiety, during instruction and test taking ($d=.40$), has a positive impact on learning. High effect sizes ($d=.72$) were also found for specific characteristics of teacher-student relationships. Hattie points out:

When students, parents, teachers and principals were asked about what influences student achievement, all BUT the teachers emphasized the relationships between the teachers and the students. Building relationships implies agency, efficacy, respect by the teacher for what the student brings to the class (from home, culture, and peers) and recognition of the life of the student.

Teachers who create environments that are student-centered, engaging, and respectful of self and others tend to have more student-initiated and student-regulated opportunities with evidence of higher achievement outcomes. How teachers create the conditions for psychological safety is vital to the successful use of formative assessment strategies. Classroom cultures, teacher and student relationships, and development of character traits happen by default or design. These aspects impact students as is evident in students' comments. The experts building the field's knowledge base of formative assessment incorporate what other researchers report about human motivation. Edward Deci (1995), Carol Dweck (2006) and Alfie Kohn (1999), to name a few of the many, have alerted educators to the influence of affective elements on student learning. Along with content and skills, educators need to cultivate the value of and strategies for learning in students (Claxton, 2009.)



Education is character-forming, but it needs to focus on a new kind of character—that of the confident lifelong explorer and navigator.

Guy Claxton, 2009

The use of formative assessment practices, feedback, and the use of goal setting with students suggest very strong effects on achievement. The power of feedback is gaining momentum in education literature. Hattie (2012) defines feedback as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher,

peer, book, parent, self/experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. Feedback has a high effect when errors made by students were unexpected – in other words, the students were confident they got it correct. This provides a meaningful opportunity for teachers to correct the misconception. Feedback that references effort or ability tends to increase engagement and performance on specific tasks. The notion of students' beliefs about their successes or failures can also have an effect which reinforced the findings mentioned above. Positive effects were found when feedback was:

- Sufficiently descriptive to correct the error
- Described previous attempts
- Related to the next level of goals
- Encouraging and did not threaten self-esteem

An important finding about feedback needs to be emphasized since it is a departure from traditional classroom norms. When teachers ask students to explain what they think they understand, it is very helpful to teachers when they *act* on that information. In other words, teachers who probe about the thinking of students regarding their performance, their misconceptions, and their engagement take advantage of this powerful source that can influence instruction. When teachers seek feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged – then teaching and learning can be synchronized. Feedback *to* teachers helps to make learning visible and powerful.

Hattie (2012) synthesizes the findings by suggesting that teaching and learning should be visible. The more transparent the teacher is in the goal, the progress, and the steps to take, the more the student is likely to learn.

Visible teaching and learning occurs when learning is the explicit and transparent goal, when it is appropriately challenging, and when the teacher and the student both (in their various ways) seek to ascertain whether and to what degree the challenging goal is attained. Visible teaching and learning occurs when there is deliberate practice aimed at attaining mastery of the goal, when there is feedback given and sought, and when there are active, passionate, and engaging people (teacher, students, peers) participating in the act of learning. It is teachers seeing learning

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through the eyes of students, and student seeing teaching as the key to their ongoing learning.
(Hattie, 2012)

These findings confirm the merits of formative assessment practices to influence, manage, and monitor learning. Further, we shall see that students intuit what works for their learning,

"I value learning more now that I am in the 12th grade."

Student

"All students care a great deal about learning. It's forever."

Student

"Seeing how you are improving builds your self-confidence; says you can do it."

Student

without having studied the literature. Formative assessment practices have the potential to fundamentally change the role of the student in his or her learning. The factors referenced above can be positively affected by formative assessment practices. How educators create the conditions in schools and classrooms that support these attitudes is fundamental to development, growth, achievement outcomes, and most importantly, students' dispositions toward learning.



SECTION THREE: THE FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

Interviewing students through the use of focus groups is an effective way to discover attitudes and experiences beyond a survey response. It allows for additional probing to discover what they mean under what they say. Often passive stakeholders of the educational process, students typically have few mechanisms to offer their point of view. The group process provides a structure and parameters to create a safe and comfortable way for students to talk and for educators to listen. Questions are carefully designed to elicit responses. Focus groups are dynamic and depend upon the interaction of the participants guided by a skilled facilitator. The results are more candid comments and an expanded depth of information than can be gathered through survey instruments.

“Will anyone take
our opinions
seriously?”

Student

Participants

Specific districts were offered the opportunity to participate based on their involvement in assessment literacy training or their prior experience using student focus groups. Four school districts and one charter school volunteered as participants. Each site was responsible to select sample groups that mirrored the school's demographic characteristics. The sample included students from grades six through twelve of all levels of performance. Figure 3.1 illustrates the number of students. The size of each sample was impacted by schedules and the logistics for prior written parental permission. The themes identified were very consistent with student focus group findings from previous investigations conducted by the facilitator.

Figure 3.1 Focus Group Participation

	Number of Students
Site A	30
Site B	42
Site C	44
Site D	42
Site E	20
Total	178

Structure

The logistics were arranged by school personnel with the support of the facilitator. Participating schools were guided through the process as outlined in two documents. One was a description about student focus groups and the second was an outline of specific instructions for hosting



focus groups. All participants, both students and school personnel, were guaranteed anonymity during the process. District and school leadership were advised to disseminate the documents widely among teachers so that all would understand the purpose, process, and potential use. It was important for district and school leadership to create an environment in which candor, openness, and safety would prevail so that student comments would be considered a source of data for school improvement.

Ground Rules

- Take this seriously
- Respond to the questions with more than this current school year in mind
- Be open, honest and respectful
- All opinions and comments matter
- No names please
- One speaker at a time
- Pass if you prefer

Groups ranged in size from 3-12 students depending upon the schedule of each school. The length of session varied according to the length of class periods in a particular school. An inviting atmosphere was created to make students comfortable in sharing their points of view. Each session began with introductions and an explanation of the purpose. Ground rules were taught, with each expectation designed to protect the participants, the purpose, and the use of the inquiry.

In two cases, district personnel were trained to lead the focus groups. All student comments were collected, organized, and analyzed by the facilitator.

Each participating district and school was provided their students' comments organized by themes and a written report summarizing the findings with suggestions for discussion with faculty. Each report was reviewed with district and school leadership. Suggested uses were discussed. Since there were multiple topics that surfaced as potential areas to analyze, school leaders were encouraged to use the data over time,

selecting specific findings of interest that might be actionable for that school. Further, the sample could be used as a qualitative baseline of student perception on those targeted practices.

Focus Groups



One challenge is to make sure that school leaders prepare teachers to look at their results and consider their impact appropriately.

Crow, 2011



SECTION FOUR: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

The *Keys to Quality Assessment* framework described in Section One (Chappuis, et al. 2012) influenced the design of the questions and probes that were used in the focus groups. Aligning this inquiry with the concepts that educators were learning in professional development activities provided a consistency to the investigation of current practices as perceived by students.

Probes are referenced within each component. Recurring themes were identified within the five components of the framework. The number of comments from the sample within that theme is referenced with representative comments collected included in this report. A brief summary of the findings follows each key.

KEY 1: PURPOSE (316 Comments)

Assessment has many purposes that sometimes support one another and sometimes compete or conflict with one another.

Earl, L., 2003

Students understand the general purpose of tests in an obvious and traditional sense. They reference the use by teachers more often than themselves. Student comments speak to the purpose, sometimes accurate, as well as their reactions to them.

PROBE: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF TESTS THAT YOU TAKE?

Theme: To see what we learned (29 comments)

- To test what we have learned.
- Assessments are like after you learn things.
- To see if you actually learned anything.
- If students were aware, were you paying attention?
- Tests keeping track of what you know.
- It tells you how well you understand a subject.
- For the teachers to see what if they are teaching what others are teaching.

Assessment through students' eyes



"Tests along the way in classrooms are helpful – then you know where you are."

Student

"All comes down to one day and it determines if you pass or fail."

Student

"How you grew as a learner, how you need to grow, how you can improve, what spots you need to work on are good."

Student

"A test is not a great way to be judged."

Student



- Tells you your strengths or weakness.

Theme: Perceptions about Idaho State Achievement Test (71 comments)

- You know if you are proficient, advanced, or basic.
- So state can figure out how school is doing, to see how they are teaching.
- They tell you how well your school is doing.
- Compare schools that did worse or who did better.
- ISATs -not sure what the purpose is. More of a national test even though it's a state test.
- If we don't pass the ISAT, we can't go on to the next grade.
- We are told it's important and you are told you are supposed to do good, it's a graduation requirement.
- If you don't pass it, you don't know what you are supposed to.
- If you are not proficient, they don't do anything. If you are proficient there is no reward
- Before on ISATs they would give you questions at your level so you could see how much you knew. It was progressively harder. Then they stopped that, now everyone gets the same questions. I preferred that because it pushed you. It has gotten easier.
- Students compare scores. Some kids rub it in if you find out you were advanced and someone else wasn't.
- We compare scores, then 2 days later then it's over and you forget about it.
- The labels make you feel less than other students if you get a lower score.
- It doesn't really show on the test what you're learning every day.
- Sitting in chair at computer, need to take a break; all the times I took it, it was really long.
- It doesn't really test your learning.
- It doesn't tell what questions you missed.
- ISAT is pointless. I don't see the reason. Based on scores from school to school. It doesn't benefit us.

Theme: Purpose of Course Finals/District End of Course Assessments (44 comments)

- See what you did that trimester, what you learned. See what you learned because you have to look at everything you've learned from the beginning of the year.
- It covers too much information from the beginning to end of a class.
- More than one answer could be correct so you get penalized.
- They are on the same day; that makes it even harder to do well.
- It's a big part of your grade.
- If you don't pass the EOC, you fail the class.
- If you don't do well, you are screwed.
- Good test takers like it.
- It would be more incentive if the EOC isn't such a big part of the grade.



- They're like the ISAT but the teacher made it up.
- Finals are just to pass, just pass the test.

Theme: SAT/ACT (15 comments)

- It's more stressful than ISAT because it relates to scholarships and getting into college.
- ACT more stressful.
- First time I took it was stressful. I try to stay out of that mindset. I retook it.
- SAT/ACT – assessment of how much you know compared to other students.
- Colleges use it, funding programs, scholarships.

PROBE: WHO ARE TESTS FOR? TELL ME HOW YOU USE THEM.

Theme: Use of tests by teachers (50 comments)

- Teachers know how they are doing; so they know how they can improve and know what spots to work on.
- See what things can make them a better teacher.
- Look at test for common mistakes.
- Helpful to teachers not to students.
- See where we are on state standards compared to where we should be.
- How effective their teaching methods were.
- For statistics – for the school to see if their studies are getting across.
- What level teachers are, if they need to be replaced.
- Helps teachers know what sticks in the kids' heads.
- Finals are for the teachers.
- So teachers can do it differently next year.
- It places you in classes.

Theme: Use of tests by students (27 comments)

- To help me focus on my learning.
- The score tells me what I've learned.
- So that we and other people know how we have progressed.
- In addition to helping teachers, it helps you. It sends you a message if we have been prepared for the test.
- Seem like the main part is helping you remember.
- See if I understand what I was actually thinking about.
- To know if you need more help.
- If you have to go back and learn something again.
- How you can listen better; if you were off task.
- Tend to go back to the details of something I didn't understand & try and figure it out for yourself.



- Need to focus more on what you should be learning.

**PROBE: TALK ABOUT TESTS THAT YOU TAKE THROUGHOUT THE YEAR IN YOUR CLASSES.
HOW DO YOU USE THESE TESTS?**

Theme: Other tests students take in classes (24 comments)

- The tests along the way in classroom are helpful, then you know where you are.
- They help you refresh your memory.
- Tests vary how helpful they are. Some tests are helpful.
- Get a test every 2-3 week, depends on the teacher.
- When we learn new things, we get homework on that and then have quizzes and tests.
- Pop quizzes, no time to study for them.
- Chapter tests, if you do poorly, teachers just move on, they didn't go back & help you, then you do bad on the ISAT.
- Take tests whether you understand or not and there may be no review.
- Some teachers quiz every two days, it's progressive and time to correct yourself.
- We have chapter reviews. Chapter reviews are graded. Sometimes we can fix questions.
- Most everything is graded to see what you know.

Theme: How students use class tests (43 comments)

- If you can't answer a question you need to pay more attention in class.
- What you need to practice more, formulas, steps.
- Get an understanding of where you're at.
- Strengths and weaknesses basically.
- You are failing the class or close to it.
- If you need to study more.
- We find out which units you are strong in.
- We were surprised with a test at the beginning of year; we were tested on what we didn't know. Teacher told us no one starts with an A. I had trouble the whole trimester.
- Tests vary how helpful they are. Some tests are helpful.
- How smart we are compared to everyone else.
- A pretest is to see what you need to learn.
- A pretest is very fast, helps you prepare. It's helpful, sneak peek into what's coming.
- Let's you ask, do I know this?
- Pretest shows you what experience you have on the topic vs. what you need to learn.
- The difference between the pretest/posttest is pretest lets you know what you know and post-test lets you know how much you learned.
- Posttests compare at end of year. Look at how far I have come and this is what I need to work on more.
- It's fun to see how far I have come.



Key 1 Purpose Findings

The probes used were aimed at discovering what students understood about the reasons for assessing. The most frequent example of assessment they offered was taking a test. Testing has been a fixture of American education since the nineteenth century although accountability is a more modern conception (Ravitch, 2002.) Comments made by students describe the purpose as they have come to understand through often obscure, shallow, and diverse messages provided. Students referenced summative tests citing the ISAT and course finals most frequently. Students describe the impact of these summative instruments in terms of grades and value to them, their teachers and to their school. Students refer to teachers the primary user of these tests almost two to one. Grades and placement decisions were mentioned most

frequently as test based decisions that are made by teachers. The few comments that reflected how students use tests focused on the grade and how they interpreted what the grade meant to them. There were many comments that suggest students find little personal value in the Idaho State Achievement Test and in end-of-course tests, referencing other decisions that are made based on these tests besides grade determinations.

There were fewer comments made by students when asked to move beyond talking about tests that were taken at the end of the year or semester. Students from one site were very familiar with the use of pre and post tests and described how such instruments were used. This was atypical of the other participants in this sample. Students referenced that quizzes and other testing practices in classrooms vary from teacher to teacher.

Students from one site offered comments that communicated a more personal value of assessment instruments used as gauges of their own learning. The general point of view for students is that assessment is a test and that the purposes of tests are for grades as the primary form of feedback, for decision making by others regarding placement, and for teacher use as a source of feedback on their teaching.

Key 1 Purpose Findings

1. The most frequent assessment experience described by students is as a culminating event-a test.
2. Students cite teachers more frequently as users of tests than themselves.
3. The predominant purpose of tests is to obtain a grade, verification of achievement and decision making by teachers.
4. The use of testing beyond a required state or national test varies by teacher, school or district.

as

KEY 2: CLEAR LEARNING TARGETS (115 Comments)

The more transparent the teacher makes the learning goals the more likely the student is to engage in the work needed to meet the goal. Also, the more the student is aware of the criteria of success, the more the student can see and appreciate the specific actions that are needed to attain these criteria.

Hattie, J. 2012

Students describe the variety of ways in which they know what they are learning. The variation suggests that communicating what students are learning is teacher dependent. Students from one site consistently used the terminology *learning target* and *goal* and described articulately how they are used and how they assist them in learning, suggesting that the approach was implemented throughout the school.

PROBE: HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LEARNING?

Theme: Ways students know what they are learning (85 comments)

Agenda (6 Comments)

- Some teachers write an agenda up on the board daily.
- There are only a few who have agendas.

Objectives (7 Comments)

- Objectives tell you what you are going to do.
- Teachers put objectives and they tell you to write it in your planner.
- What you are supposed to learn.
- It helps you know what's going to be on the test.

On the board (17 Comments)

- Sometimes it's written on the board.
- They have things we're supposed to do on the board.
- Teacher puts it on the board - Today the student will be able to know, if you are able to answer when the teacher calls on you. One of my teachers gives us a paper that has all of the things that we'll be learning in the unit. It's like a list.
- Sometimes in a power point there's something that tells us what we're doing.

Assessment through students' eyes

• • •

"Learning targets help us aim for the spot you need to hit."

Student

"Some do and sometimes I have no idea, and you start doing it without knowing the purpose but it depends on the teacher and their teaching style."

Student

"You figure it out when they start teaching it."

Student



Tell us (13 comments)

- They just tell us.
- Teachers tell you what you are going to do.
- It is brought up in lecture. I feel like teachers who are more effective bring it up in lecture.
- Overview of what we will be doing in class.

Other ways (14 comments)

- Our homework most of the time.
- They will tell you for assignments, assigned reading, what terms to learn.
- It's a list of assignments.
- Have us take notes.
- Pre-test.
- If you can explain it to someone else.
- You figure it out from whatever you are doing, homework assignments or worksheets.

Not sure (28 comments)

- I'm not able to tell you what we are learning.
- Sometimes I am clear on what to do.
- Lots of times I'm confused.
- Not all teachers tell us.

Learning Targets (12 comments)

- We get learning targets.
- (Learning targets) what you should be able to do by the end of lesson.
- Helpful to know the learning targets.
- If one subject drifts into another, I go back to learning targets.

Goal Setting (11 comments)

- We set goals; discuss what you can do better.
- Character goal and academic goal.
- Easier to set goals on what you need to work on.
- Do goals. Everyone has them, character and academic goals with forms you fill out to show how you are doing. You really think about how you have improved.
- Reflections on your goals help you know like on a little index card. It would really help if it is more often.



Key 2 Clear Learning Targets Findings

The science behind the practice of explicitly communicating the specific knowledge, skill or performance that a student is learning is that the more visible and transparent the destination is to the student, the more their motivation, sense of control, and investment is cultivated (Hattie, 2012.) Knowing what is expected is the platform upon which a teacher can provide useful information to the student about where they are in their pursuit of that target and what they need to do incrementally to accomplish the skill. Without that precise direction, the learning process is ambiguous and to many students inaccessible.

Based on students' comments, teachers' methods vary significantly regarding how expectations are communicated to them. Students related an assortment of routines that they experienced in their classrooms. Some students expressed that they often did not know what they were learning and had to extrapolate the goal through a variety of ways. Their comments also suggest that they are most often told the *activities* that they are to do but not what they are to learn. Confusion regarding *what* they are learning fosters a passive role of the student.

There may be multiple reasons for the current pattern of practice that students' comments suggest. Teachers likely lack the knowledge regarding the evidence that exists related to clarity of goals and targets (Sadler, 1989; Hattie, 2009.) Teachers may write objectives on the white boards yet students too often cannot articulate what they are learning because it is not communicated in a manner that they easily comprehend. Teacher centered language and traditional teaching orientations perpetuate fuzzy learning intentions contributing to an inactive or compliant role of the student. The elegant simplicity of three explicit organizing questions can unlock the potential to transform teaching *and* learning: Where am I going? Where am I now? How do I close the gap (Sadler, 1989; Chappuis, 2009)?

Key 2 Clear Learning Targets Findings

1. Communicating what students are learning depends upon the teacher.
2. Many comments suggest that students cannot articulate what they are learning. Their comments reflected confusion between the activity they were to complete and a specific skill or information they were learning.
3. Use of clear learning targets so that students understand them is not widely used across the sites in this study. Consistent use of learning targets and goal setting is used by one site and described consistently and favorably by those students.



KEY 3: SOUND DESIGN (92 Comments)

Schools and teachers can accommodate difference in the needs of students only if they have dependable day-to-day evidence of their students' current levels of achievement.

Chappuis, S., Commodore, C., Stiggins, R. 2010

Comments were limited in this category as one might expect. Students described what was in their scope of experience. The types of tests and the question forms have been fairly predictable. They referenced multiple choice responses most often. Their comments also described strategy they use and their preferences in test formats.

PROBE: DESCRIBE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUESTIONS IN THE ASSESSMENTS YOU TAKE.

Theme: Response Type

Multiple choice formats (45 comments)

- Most tests are multiple choice.
- On multiple choice, you have a one in four chance of getting it right.
- Some classes you never get multiple choice but some are always multiple choice like science.
- If you know you know it and it isn't coming to your brain, it is sitting right there so you can choose it.
- Educated guess. Students always say, I guessed on half of it. A lot of students don't know the material so they just guess their way through it.
- I like multiple choice, sometimes you know the answer but you can't remember until you see it.
- I try to narrow down the choices and not get overwhelmed. If they are too big or hard, I skip it.
- That's the thing though, it's a lot of students favorite, this is common opinion, but I don't think that really shows what you've learned cuz common sense can get you half way through it, you can get through the 2 obvious dumb answers and then get really close to having it. Although I do prefer them and it is easier to get a good grade on it, I don't think they work as good.

Assessment through students' eyes



"Depends on if the test is only reviewing what you know or applying it. Using the information is easier if it is applied and it tells you if you really know it."

Student

"They are all tests. It's the lesser of three evils."

Student

"Tests are not even related to what was taught."

Student



Short answers, Explanations, Essay (33 comments)

- If you have to explain it it's harder and usually you have to explain.
- Give your answer and explain how you got it, most of time it's hard to explain. I know the answer but it's hard to say it.
- Explaining makes you think is hard.
- Sometimes if you read it and it makes sense but you can't put it in words.
- Writing stuff down is harder. I like multiple choice, you read something and an answer clicks.
- Short answer, it can show the people who do understand it and those who don't.
- But I feel like short answer just makes me look stupid.
- If it's a short answer, you have a greater chance of writing something down that could be wrong.
- When you have to compare 2 things, their opinions, I forget details.
- I'm not a good writer, so I don't like essay.
- It's your opinion more.
- Teachers are biased so if you don't agree you don't get a good grade.
- Sometimes you can just write and keep going. It doesn't matter what you write. I just wrote and told stories, and I did fine. It didn't matter.
- I'm good at BS-ing.

Theme: Other related musings (15 comments)

- I don't like pop quizzes because you can't study for them.
- Every class took the same test, so some stuff was on it your class may have not learned it but others classes probably did.
- Depends on the teacher and the wording when they write their own test.
- This year, we learn it and then get tested a few days later and then gets graded.
- Sometimes they seem to word the questions to confuse you. Trick questions. Seem to be more than one answer.
- Some questions, you have never heard before.
- Questions should be more clear, not sure what they want.

KEY 3 SOUND DESIGN FINDINGS

The design of an assessment instrument or strategy should be influenced by the previous keys discussed – the purpose of the assessment and the content, skill or performance expected of the student. If the specific learning target is not clear, the structure of the assessment may not elicit the best evidence of the intended learning. The quality of assessment is compromised.

Students experience multiple choice as the predominate format of tests. Educational practices have taught them to expect multiple choice and many expressed the strategies they have developed to determine the correct response. Their remarks suggest that producing the information, explaining their understanding, or extended expressions of what they know is more challenging for most of them. Students relate the reasons for preferences with some degree of internalizing their perception of their strengths and weaknesses. There were a few comments that suggest that what is tested may not be tightly aligned to what is taught from their viewpoint, perpetuating a notion that tests should contain an element of surprise.

Key 3 Sound Design Findings

1. Students are most familiar with multiple choice responses.
2. Students articulate their preferences, their test taking strategies, and the reasons for their preferences.
3. Testing, assessing and grading practices vary from class to class.

K-12 education has long focused on foundational levels of cognitive development – acquisition of knowledge, skills, and applications. All of these levels continue to be essential yet insufficient in a context in which technologies have impacted every aspect of life. We live in an age where



information is easily accessible.

Interpreting that information is critical.

Ultimately our students need to be able to use knowledge to think critically, analytically, and integrate information across areas. If what we teach must include higher levels of using knowledge acquired, then we must become more adept in using assessment that reflects that type of learning.

KEY 4: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION (391 Comments)

Who was watching out for the students I wondered, in a discourse in which pupils were expected to snap out of it, quit goofing off, and pull up their performance in quantifiable, ever-ascending yearly increments-without a change in teaching methods, institutional culture, or ideas about education?

Kirsten Olson, 2009

Students have much to say in this area. The probes triggered a variety of related topics. The intention was to investigate how students know how they are doing in school. What do students use to monitor their learning and how is it working for them? It is of no surprise that grades are the predominant form of feedback. There are additional comments related to descriptive feedback which varies by teacher.

PROBES: HOW DO YOU KNOW HOW YOU ARE LEARNING AND PROGRESSING?

Theme: Grades tell us how we are doing. (48 comments)

- Mostly everything is graded.
- Most of it (our work) is graded, depends on the teacher.
- Helpful to have grades so you know how you are doing.
- It's not the grade that matters. It's a representation of how hard you try.
- I am overly obsessed with my grades, my parents try to calm me down; feel like I just have to accelerate.
- The teacher might tell us how we did as a class, not just individual.
- Every teacher grades differently so I don't like that because it's just the teacher's opinion that becomes the factor.
- I might fail the class if I don't turn in assignments, so it really doesn't tell you what you know.

Theme: Other Ways (14 comments)

- I can tell that I am progressing because I begin to understand the subject.
- Rubrics tell you where you are.
- Pre and posttests help you improve throughout the year.
- Lately we have more check ins. How we are doing on our homework, we have 4 or so.
- Teachers come to us and tell us if we are having trouble.

*Assessment
through
students' eyes*

• • •

"Seeing how you are improving builds your self-confidence, says you can do it."

Student

"It's about the grade. The knowledge is nice. It's nice to look smart when you know things."

Student



PROBE: WHAT DO GRADES TELL YOU?

- They tell how smart you are in school.
- How well I did on assignments.
- If you are doing good in that subject and what you are understanding about it.
- If I'm doing my work but not if I'm really learning.
- Grades tell me if I'm going to be able to play sports or not.
- I get higher grades but some kids in class are smarter than me, but I get highest grades cuz I try and they don't care.
- Good grades help you get into colleges. Grades show how well of a student you are. Are you the kind of student who doesn't do their work or are you the kind of student who works hard?
- High school is the only 4 years preparing you for the world and most people make too much of a huge deal about grades cuz in real world you don't have grades or tests unless you count credit cards as tests.

PROBE: DESCRIBE OTHER WAYS THAT YOU KNOW HOW YOU ARE DOING?

Theme: Feedback from teachers. (78 comments)

- It gives you an idea of what you progressed on. If they tell you what you did a good job on and describe what made it good.
- Both student and teacher critique is helpful.
- When teachers say next time you need to work on this, grades only after a second chance, give you more time to do it over.
- Once you take the test, teacher will tell you other strategies to solve a problem.
- On an essay there's comments, corrects, constructive criticism that helps you.
- In math, my teacher circles where I get it wrong which helps.
- Some write a lot on how to improve. And sometimes it is 'good job' Teacher put notes, like 'need to study better', 'you need to work on this', or 'get help with this'.
- Some teachers put notes and let you keep your tests or give your tests back before the final so you know what to study and what to work on.
- Both student and teacher critique is helpful.
- Words should not be sugar coated, it makes it worse.

*Assessment
through
students' eyes*



"There is a huge difference between knowing you made a mistake and why you made a mistake and knowing how to fix it that's the thing with final tests. You take a final and you're done."

Student

"I want good information so I know what to do."

Student

"It's pointless to just get the grade."

Student

Through Students' Eyes



- Teacher says, 'come see me', only a couple who tell you they noticed something you struggle with.
- An example is in math, I got specific feedback on a problem and how to do it different.
- Depends on teacher.
- Some teachers go in depth, help you figure out where you went wrong.
- Most of time, you get things just marked wrong.
- They tell you what is wrong but not often how to correct it.
- I guess the feedback makes me want to do better.
- I hate it when they mark it wrong and you have no idea what you did wrong, when you take time grading it's better for students, but I get it though when you grade hundreds of paper for years, I know it gets kinda monotonous.
- It's up to you to find the right answer.
- Check mark.
- Right/ wrong.
- Good work.
- One teacher wrote 'train wreck'.
- There's not usually feedback.

Theme: Monitoring Tools (20 comments)

- Grades posted to Skyward. Don't know specifically what you got wrong
- PASS once a week, twice a week, depending on the assignments. Assignments are posted and grade.
- Teachers will leave notes on PASS that are attached to an assignment. I did an essay in 8th grade and the teacher made a comment on how I could improve a paragraph and that helped me.
- Family link, still not always accurate.
- Have teachers update more regularly.

PROBE: WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND SOMETHING?

Theme: Ask teachers, sometimes friends. (46 comments)

- You go ask teacher if you want to understand.
- Ask their teacher, or other student to help.
- Use before school and after school help, but students might have work, bus, obligations.
- Some teachers you can email.
- Talk to teachers and arrange a time, difficult to catch them sometimes.
- If I don't understand, I ask.

Assessment through students' eyes



"Specialized one-on-one time with the teacher to go over things in detail."

Student

"Depends on teachers. If you don't understand, after you take the test it's too late. They move on."

Student

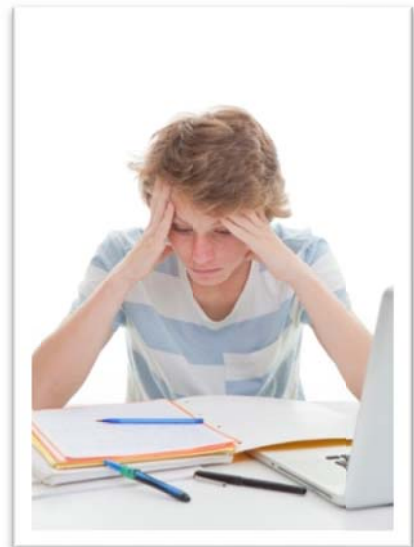


- Some teachers offer after school, if they aren't coaching, some before school tutoring, some are not available.
- You need to be asking and have to do it. So, now I'm doing it [asking] and it's much better. I'm doing better in my classes.
- Sometimes I don't know exactly what I don't understand.
- I ask questions but sometimes you get, 'I already taught it so go look it up on your own'.
- Some say 'you should know it', 'why don't you understand it', 'you need to understand it', 'pay more attention'.
- If you've had a bad experience with a teacher you don't want to go back and ask again.
- Some people hold back from asking because they don't want to look stupid.
- When you make a decision not to talk to the teacher [because] it's embarrassing.
- Teacher might get frustrated with you.
- Ask friends sometimes.
- I try to do everything on my own.

PROBE: HOW DO YOUR PARENTS KNOW HOW YOU ARE DOING?

Theme: Communicating to Parents (84 comments)

- Our report cards twice a year.
- My parents read it over & we talk about what I can do better.
- Student led conference. Portfolio is a place where you can put your best work. You schedule a date with your parents. They get a taste of what you are doing in class and what you are doing outside of class.
- Check on internet.
- Depends on the teacher.
- They look at PASS to see all our work and tell me to try harder.
- Grade book, PASS, some of my teachers send emails
- As long as I am not basic on ISAT, my parents are ok. They don't talk much about it. They know what it means, but don't really know what ISAT is.
- Parents get scores, but we don't talk about them.
- Parent teacher conferences seem pointless. They talk about your progress and say the same thing every year.
- They only notify parents if there is something bad.
- Teachers say more about the bad.
- Portfolio, we get to show our parents our best work of year.
- Portfolio for student led conference, it's a time for you to show what you are proud of.
- I always tell my parents about Friday folders.
- Time with your parents to show them how you genuinely care about your work.





KEY 4 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FINDINGS

The purpose of the assessment should influence the information generated, the decisions that are made based on the results, and what is communicated to the users. When the purposes and users are not explicit, the value of information is diminished. Students, teachers, and schools use time, energy, and resources in the assessment process. What do students tell us regarding the information they receive and how they use that information?

Students named grades as the principal representation of their learning. They indicate that most of the things they are expected to do are graded. Their comments indicate a wide range of interpretations of the grades they receive, how they use them, and the implications of the grades they attain. Their comments highlight the un-calibrated and variable nature of grading and offer little evidence that grades actually support learning.

Students described other information that they receive from teachers regarding their learning. They related the feedback that aided learning and articulated how that information

was helpful. Their comments mirrored the research illustrated in Section Two of this report. These comments led to additional probes regarding what they do when they do not understand something. Students clearly value the time that they spend with teachers that is oriented to their specific learning needs. The quality of the interaction with their teacher has an enduring effect on them and their efforts to learn.

Students shared their perceptions of what is communicated to parents and how their parents use the information. Some parents use the electronic tools provided by their district, some teachers have websites, and some teachers use emails. Most of their comments were unremarkable regarding communication venues, citing that most of the instances of personal communication tended to indicate a problem. There was one exception with one site. Students from this site related the procedures used at their school with detail, excitement, and import.

Key 4 Effective Communication Findings

1. Grades are the primary feedback to students and most work that students do is graded.
2. Students describe in detail the type feedback that they value and why they value it.
3. The use of descriptive feedback varies from teacher to teacher and is valued by students when it is given.
4. Time with teachers is important to students.
5. Parents and students have access to information regarding grades and assignments yet regular use of these mechanisms varies.

KEY 5: STUDENT INVOLVEMENT (740 Comments)

The teacher's job is not to transmit knowledge, nor to facilitate learning. It is to engineer effective learning environments for the students. The key features of effective learning environments are that they create student engagement and allow teachers, learners, and their peers to ensure that the learning is proceeding in the intended direction. The only way we can do this is through assessment. That is why assessment is, indeed, the bridge between teaching and learning.

Dylan William (2011)

As evidenced in the number of comments, students are very clear on what helps their learning and what hinders their learning. The format below organizes the comments to illustrate the influences on learning as perceived by students. In the left column, students' comments refer to things that they perceive to support their learning. In the right column, the comments reference things that inhibit learning as they see it. The illustration is used to contrast remarks in hopes that it facilitates reflection by educators. Tests were mentioned infrequently in comparison to many other factors. Students mention with clear perspectives how the learning environment, relationships, and disposition affect their mindset toward learning.

PROBES: DESCRIBE THE THINGS THAT TEACHERS DO THAT MOTIVATE YOU TO LEARN. DESCRIBE THINGS THAT HINDER YOUR LEARNING.

Theme: Understanding something is important to me. (75 comments)

Helps My Learning →

- When teachers break it down and explain it to you.
- Making sure everyone understands it.
- Have your own time with the teacher to ask questions.
- Sometimes it's a problem with getting the message through. Teach us until the students get it.
- Has examples of what good answers looks like.
- If they pause occasionally and see if we are getting what they are teaching.
- Go around the room and ask individually, because some of us are embarrassed. Walk around, talk with each of us.

← *Hinders my learning*

- A lot of teachers don't take long enough teaching something. They don't go slow enough. They should slow down.
- Can't get to everyone so they don't reach everyone.
- I would have thought that teachers would be smart enough that if a lot of people don't know they should figure out that they should have explained it better
- Some rush through. Teachers should slow down and explain and we would do better on tests. It would help students understand better and they would do better on tests.
- Words don't make it clear. The words are different on tests then they use.

Theme: A variety of instructional strategies (116 comments)

Helps My Learning →

- When they teach you in different ways.
- Mix up your methods, don't always take notes, lecture, use a variety of methods.
- Vary it, because students learn different.
- Student should know their learning range, their strengths, how they learn best.
- Always ask us what we think.
- Discuss with each other.
- Socratic seminars.
- Sometimes projects help you learn.
- Get kids involved, up and moving, keeps us more alert and we are more apt to understand.
- Make the requirements clear.

←

Hinders my learning

- Teacher doesn't talk for the whole afternoon.
- Sitting taking notes for weeks on end.
- Boring classes that lecture the whole time.
- Just not educated about content.
- Teacher just talked about it in college terms, made me feel dumb.
- We have different ways of learning and the teachers have only one way of teaching it.
- We get set up to not succeed, it's really complicated, there are time restrictions. It should be based on us and the type of project.
- Get frustrated with teachers who don't know how to teach or they assign work that doesn't help me learn.

Theme: We learn when teachers are excited, make it meaningful and interesting. (98 comments)

Helps My Learning →

- When they are excited, have enthusiasm, when they show enthusiasm, I get excited.
- They actually like it. They can make it sound interesting.
- Teach you and make it a lot of fun.
- Teachers tell about their stories, something that happened to them.
- Some subjects are really interesting and that motivates you.
- Examples, hands on for everything; do it, see it.
- Passionate teachers.
- Make us laugh.
- I like when they interact with you; they interact with you and make you laugh. It helps you relax and not be stressed. Makes you feel energetic.

←

Hinders my learning

- In some classes, you better get it the way I teach it.
- They don't know how to explain it.
- Just not educated about content.
- They don't just say here's the lecture, we do gallery walks.
- Some have no interest in teaching you correctly.
- Some of them might even hate it [teaching], they lost their passion.
- It doesn't motivate when I feel that I am doing it just to get a grade, when it's not related to anything.
- When they teach with you tube videos.
- Sometimes school is so boring. When I go to a class and the teacher just stands up at the front and lectures, that's boring.

Theme: We use homework, assignments, and assessments to practice. (66 comments)

Helps My Learning →

- After each assignment my teacher will ask if they need to show a problem on the board and will ask us personally as we go through it on the board.
- Test review after the test is given. When a teacher reviews the questions that people got wrong with the whole class. Even if we got it right it helps us to review it.
- Homework helps you to repeat a process so that you learn and you get more familiar with it.
- Reflections help you. Portfolios are for best work. What did you do best on? What you need to work on?
- Self-assessments are really good. It doesn't tell you what your teacher thinks but what you think.
- Peer critiques, other students' opinions, other points of view can help you see how other people are doing it.

← *Hinders my learning*

- They make you turn in homework and never grade it. They preach responsibility.
- It's not really effective, getting the assignments and going off and doing them.
- Parents want us to do our work in class because they can't always help us at home.
- Sometimes they are a lot more than you need to learn something. When it's less, we can do it.
- How hard they quiz and test.
- Have less technology use, more human interaction.
- No more classes on computer.
- I prefer to hear from the teacher because they are experienced.
- I personally don't like peer critiques. It's embarrassing. You have no idea what they think. If it's your friend, then it's okay.

Theme: The affective aspects of learning (107 comments)

Helps My Learning →

- They care about how we learn and they care about us.
- Teachers' attitude, how they value their students, they genuinely care.
- When teachers are easier to talk to, it's more comfortable.
- You feel like they give you another chance. You can work harder for the next time.
- When teachers have better characteristics, they want to teach and help you, rather than someone just looking for a job.
- If you push me, that is good.
- Depends on teachers, class size,

← *Hinders my learning*

- Obnoxious kids causing problems in classroom, deal with that so everyone has the same chance to learn.
- People cause drama. I told my parents, please don't make me go back because kids bully me.
- Scared to ask, may be ostracized for not getting it right.
- People should choose this career with a passion to do this. Somewhere along the line, they lost the passion.
- Teachers personality, how they are feeling affects kids. Don't bring your mood with you.
- They have stereotypes. They know

Through Students' Eyes



Helps My Learning

- depending on what style.
- Need to be sharp in your industry.
- Setting high goals helps; if you put a mark somewhere, it helps you lay out the small goals to get to the big goals.



Hinders my learning

- they are not going to do well so they don't pay attention to them.
- Can't be truthful with your teachers that their teaching is boring because you want to be nice.

PROBES: TALK ABOUT HOW YOU PREPARE FOR ASSESSMENTS.

Theme: Feelings about tests (102 comments)

- Really depends on teacher. They explain the test and tell you what you know and what you don't know.
- Study guides help. Then you know what you need to know.
- Usually the teachers give us review questions or tell us what to study.
- They [ISAT] take too long.
- I enjoy the test experience. I like the pretest. After you learn you can see how you improved on the post test.
- Pretest motivates me. You have no idea of these things but you know you are going to learn them.
- It's stressful. It's hard to remember everything you learned over the course of the semester.
- I do really well on assignments but freeze during tests, that brings my grade down.
- I feel anxious. People judge me. If I take longer, I feel okay but I wonder what others think.
- EOC is looming over you.
- Should give us time to talk before a test, some do- 5 minutes to get your jitters out.
- Frustrating when they change the format & questions at the end of the year from what they've been doing earlier in the year.
- If the teacher teaches me one way and it's worded differently, I hate that.
- When they put questions on the test that we never studied or learned about, that's not right.
- I study for the test then I forget it. It's to see what I really know but I forget a lot after the test.

Test taking is not one of my strengths.

Assessment through students' eyes



"At the end (ISAT), my brain gets tired. Sometimes I just don't go back and check because I am tired. I could have typing errors, but I don't care."

Student

"Tests are not helpful because it doesn't tell you what you missed and why. It's more beneficial if you know what you did wrong."

Student



KEY 5 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT FINDINGS

This particular key includes a serious consideration of how students own their learning. It is not simply a matter of taking responsibility but a matter of cultivating student's natural internal motivation to learn.

Students tell us a great deal about what inspires their learning. The number of their comments along with their insight, conviction, and consistency of their comments suggest that their point of view is worth consideration.

Students describe in detail instructional strategies that support their learning. The areas mentioned are characterized by their active roles during the learning. Their involvement during the learning is expressed as an asset in multiple ways in their remarks. As in previous findings, students relate that instructional approaches are idiosyncratic across classes.

It is also important to note that students' descriptions made few references to assessment as they currently experience as something that motivates their learning. Since their previous comments imply a narrow view of assessment as test-taking, they likely have not experienced more learner-centered use of formative assessing that provide them with just in time information about their progress.

Students frequently referenced relational aspects that influence their learning, which was unanticipated. The rapport and connection that teachers make with students is a compelling variable for their learning in addition to the instructional methods used. Both of these communicate to students an intentional and too often and unintended message that they internalize about themselves as learners. Emotional elements of schooling practices, including testing, are inevitable. It remains a responsibility of educators to foster those attitudes that enhance, rather than diminish their belief in themselves as successful learners.

Key 5 Student Involvement Findings

1. Students identify those things that support and hinder their learning.
2. Students cite the variation across teachers related to all aspects referenced.
3. The psychological safety shaped by teachers is an important condition for learning.
4. There is a clear emotional element for students before, during, and after testing experiences that has impact on their dispositions as learners.



SECTION FIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC ACTION

There is a concept in quality improvement called the cost of missed opportunity. In the business sector, the cost is mostly revenue. In education, the cost is to human capability. Education has an opportunity to fundamentally transform the role of students in their own learning. The timing is optimal for designing improvement efforts that are truly learner-centered. If this occasion is ignored, the next ten years will likely resemble the past ten years.

Based on the findings in this inquiry, it is possible to formulate several recommendations based on what students tell us. Timing is a factor and the current context is overloaded with a multitude of solutions to improvement of education. The following proposals have been limited to actions that can be taken at a local level which is where the students and teachers are.

- 1. Seek student voice.** Students are the primary beneficiaries of education. Historically, students have rarely been asked for their points of view about the practices that matter to them (The Education Alliance, 2004.) That is beginning to change and more schools are using surveys to solicit feedback (MET Project, 2012.) Many of Idaho schools are also using student survey instruments provided in some cases by Idaho State Department of Education as a data source of school improvement.

This recommendation proposes that we seek a different type of response from our students. A conversational response that communicates to them that teachers and the school value their opinion and will consider it. This less formal but structured focus group approach creates the conditions for educators to probe students' views more deeply while communicating to students a sense of value, role, and respect for their thoughts. The purpose of using student feedback has formative benefits to teachers. Two simple questions can be used by teachers to

Students' Aspirations

"We care about learning a lot. We want go to college and use everything- in life."

Student

"A teacher took our feedback and changed and is so much more helpful now."

Student

"I need good grades to get into a good college."

Student

"Be happy when you are teaching, it makes kids want to learn."

Student

"Should be more open, listen, act like students opinions matter."

Student

"Your inside character reflects you."

Student



cultivate a safe, trusting relationship and provide insight from the view from the student chairs: What things do I do that help you to learn and what things do not help you to learn? The responses can provide just in time responses, allow for mid-course adjustments, or reflective action-just as formative assessment practices might impact students.

- 2. Use formative assessment strategies in the classroom to support students in learner-centered action, ownership, and motivation.** Learning is a natural, yet complex human activity. The keys that make a difference to learning have been made explicit in the research. Educators need to apply that research through knowledge, practice to perfect different pedagogy, and willingness to engage the student in ways that empower them to be the primary actors on their learning. The use of assessment strategies *for* learning has the potential to fundamentally change the culture of the school. For one set of students from one of the participating sites, there was a noteworthy consistency across groups and grade levels of students. These assessment practices were widely practiced. Students shared common language and could explain how these strategies were used and the benefits to their learning. These practices were a distinguishing school wide practice.

To support this practice in schools, leaders need to make it a priority, not as a mandate but as a process of learning about the *why's* and *how's* of formative assessment so that it becomes a matter of conviction, not compliance. Leaders and teachers need to learn together. Effective professional development must be provided. Isolated training events that are separated from the work continue to be popular yet yield little change in practice. School leaders need to create the conditions that support the acquisition of new information, the safe and supported practice of new skills, and regular feedback to sustain the development of expertise. Individual teachers can change the culture of their classrooms through formative assessment routines, rituals, and strategies. Only the leader is positioned to influence the culture of the entire school.

- 3. Communicate information to all users of current assessment instruments with intention and accuracy.** Tests and grades will likely continue to be a feature of schooling. A question for educational leaders and teachers to ask is how have we messaged what these mean? Based on student comments, there are multiple interpretations. The assumption made in this report is that students need information that helps them know what to do next to master anything. Summative tests and grades can *verify* a level of learning. Do our practices help our students and our parents interpret these events accurately and in ways that enfranchise them to learning? Since



both testing and grading consume a significant amount of time for educators and for students, how are these things used to maximize *what students and parents know* about their learning? Student comments suggest they are left to make conclusions on their own at best. Messages are communicated by intention or default. Is this a potential area of improvement for schools?

- 4. Invest in the development of growth mindsets in our students.** Shaping a student's positive self-esteem is something that effective educators do all the time. Increasingly more and more schools are making that a priority and including that has a feature of their brand. Work from researchers such as Dweck, Deci, and Kohn to name only a few is being pursued as we struggle with the needs of diverse students. Academic achievement cannot happen if students do not believe in themselves. They must expect that they are capable learners to persevere through those moments where learning is just hard. A steady diet of A's or Advanced reinforce the eager, self-directed student and a steady diet of C's, D's, F's or Basic reinforce a cycle of thinking that contributes to counterproductive orientation to a student's belief that they are capable learners. School should leave students with a sense that learning is something that is important, regardless of their future adult roles and regardless of the levels to which they achieve. Engaging in courageous conversations regarding how educators and schools can take deliberate efforts to develop a sense of efficacy in learners is a move that can matter.

Student perceptions are a valuable source of data and have a long shelf life of utility. The things that students tell us have potential to dramatically change teaching, improve learning, and influence the culture of the school. Their comments often mirror what we learn from the research. We know the things that have a more significant effect on learning and those things that have less effect. On what, then, shall we focus?

.....if assessment is not working effectively in our classrooms every day, then assessment at all other levels (district, state, national, or international) represents a complete waste of time and money.
Rick Stiggins, 1999



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