

ASSESSMENT REFORM: SOME CONCRETE NEXT STEPS

1. **Help faculty to “own” the problem of quality** - both in terms of “input” (the caliber of assessments and school performance indicators), and “output” (the quality expected of resultant student performance).

Keys to the strategy:

- ensure that all new initiatives are seen as solutions to problems raised by tangible and quantifiable problems - based on credible data about current performance, such as student papers
- establish dissonance through data to show discrepancies between current practices and intended achievement targets, between faculty's beliefs and its practices
- helping faculties to understand that local expectations for students are now uneven and divergent across teachers, courses and “tracks”.

Tactics:

- a. Have faculty or teams review existing policies for those not congruent with a mission focused on “quality” in student performance (such as those dealing with grading, promoting, scheduling, tracking, etc.)
 - This can result in the development of an explicit building-level assessment policy to ensure that tests and grading are fair, appropriate, useful, reliable, credible, and consistent with stated achievement targets.
- b. School leaders should audit the quality of current tests - especially across “tracks” or levels: do tests operationalize the current mission of the faculty?
 - This can lead to annual reports to the faculty on the articulation of teacher tests with stated “achievement targets” and district goals; and where the authenticity/ engaging qualities of the tests is assessed.
 - Solicit information from the students and parents about the quality of current testing, grading -- and especially the quality of teacher feedback
- c. Distribute samples of the best, average, and worst student work from each grade or track. Ask faculties to grade the work, and discuss the quality and range of the work.

- d. Distribute print-outs of all grades given in the school and district. Balance this information against surveys to students, parents, and colleges, about the quality of each school program. Ask faculty to assess results: are the grades "norm-referenced" to the building (i.e. A = what our best kids do) or "standard-referenced"?
- e. Distribute any test score results that provide insight into an aptitude vs. achievement comparison: are we getting the most from our kids?

2. **Begin to develop some authentic assessments, where there is agreement that they are needed.** They should be seen as necessary -- articulated with targeted achievements -- and credible to all faculty, and other school constituencies.

Keys to the strategy

- *beginning where there is a strong sense of the inadequacy of current testing*
- *developing credible tests that make accountability possible - i.e. such that faculties now have worthy goals and "owned" measures for those goals - making it difficult to excuse poor performance by blaming the test*

Tactics:

- a. Examine current state and local tests to determine the targeted achievements that are "falling through the cracks". Develop a few small pilot assessments to determine how students fare on such performance-based assessments.
- b. Survey faculty and other constituencies to determine which state or commercial tests are seen as most and least credible. Also, determine how frequently and how well test data is now currently used to improve instruction in the building.
- c. Develop some sampling strategies so that minimally-necessary data is obtained about performance on otherwise time-consuming or complex tasks.
- d. Develop an assessment policy statement for the school or district, to ensure that assessment is apt, useful, fair, credible, and honest to all constituencies, etc.

3. **Re-define “passing”.** Devise credit and promotion standards so that *quality is not an option*: Establish a culture of quality where every student is expected to produce quality work -- where major work products are not done until they are done right.

Key to the strategy:

- *getting faculty to see that if student is properly placed, then each student should be expected to produce quality - in all classes and ‘tracks’.*
- *getting faculty to see that many current practices and habits undercut the quest for quality*

Tactics:

- a. Ensure that each teacher has a grading policy that rewards quality over quantity or begrudging compliance, results over merely good intentions; provides time and coaching for work to be revised and re-submitted; rewards positive trends in performance rather than averaging all grades.
- b. Have faculty examine such scoring systems as the music performance testing, athletic, and vocational scoring systems, where the “degree of difficulty” is separately scored from the “quality of the performance”. Determine how such systems might be incorporated in academic settings.
- c. Ask teachers to conduct a small experiment whereby for a few assignments or tests the only grades are “A.” “B” or “incomplete”. Develop a more comprehensive faculty policy whereby “mastery learning” practices are incorporated into all testing and grading.
- d. Ask all teachers to conduct “error analyses” on a mid-term test or its equivalent, and report their findings to the faculty: “What are the primary causes of student errors? How might those errors be better avoided in the first place?”

4. **Re-define school success:** develop and employ more “value added” and “performance-gap” indicators, standards and measures.

Key to the strategy:

- *making school reform work data-driven*

- *getting faculty to re-define their jobs as “achievers of results,” given the students they have; ensuring that appropriate performance gains occur over time, in reference to exit-level standards*
- *ensuring that faculty see their job is to minimize the gap between their best and worst performers, whether in looking at individual students, classes, or sub-groups of the whole student population*
- *getting faculty to set yearly specific performance targets by repeatedly monitoring in terms of those targets through on-going standard-referenced assessment*

Tactics:

- a. Re-design the report card and transcript to report current student performance against exit-level standards, not just age-grade norms.
 - b. Develop shared, longitudinal/developmental scoring criteria to evaluate student progress over time against fixed standards.
 - c. More effectively distinguish between aptitude and achievement, and growth and progress, in reporting the quality of student performance.
 - d. Establish team or department year-end and multi-year goals for monitoring, adjusting, and thus minimizing the gaps in student sub-group comparative performances.
 - e. Use standardized tests to assess student progress over time (in a pre/test, post/test way), instead of comparing aggregate performance of this year’s class to last year’s.
 - f. Use high-quality national tests, on a sampling basis, to assess overall student performance (not just in advanced programs).
 - g. Develop indicators that compare the success of your schools against the success of similar schools (in terms of test scores, placement, etc.).
5. **Move toward standards (vs. local norms):** use exemplars and “world-class” benchmarks in evaluation to get beyond local norms or arbitrary cut scores for standards.

Key to the strategy:

- *help faculties understand the difference between standards and expectations*

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•ensure that faculties see how local grades (hence, transcripts) are not helpful or credible to outsiders because grades are not linked to clear, common standards. Get them to see that standardized tests are the inevitable result of school failure to set and uphold clear, shared standards

Tactics:

- a. Collect and distribute copies of models -- exemplary papers, products, performances -- that would be used to better guide and standardize teacher grading. Use these models to "anchor" the scoring of work in the building. Students should be given models and taught from them; parents should receive a booklet of models and guidance in helping students meet standards.
- b. Ask the faculty in subject-area meetings to "holistically" grade the same piece of work, on a 7 point scale -- but using no agreed-upon scoring criteria and no anchors; then provide a set of papers, a 7-point scoring rubric with clear descriptors, and a set of "anchor" papers drawn from one of your school's or district's best classes. Compare scores given in parts one and two.
- c. Collect and distribute samples of work sampled from your best "institutional customers" to show faculties the expectations placed upon your former students (i.e. the work requirements and grading standards in force at the next level of schooling and/or employment).
- d. Establish an exit-level assessment, anchored by the entry-level standards at the next level -- the "institutional customer". (For example, a writing task, with scoring rubric and "anchor papers" taken from a college course; vocational course linked to entry-level job standards, etc.).
- e. Establish a "Post-graduation committee" to review performance of former students, survey of former students about preparation, and report upon testing, grading and work-requirement standards of the better next-level programs in which your "alumni" are enrolled.
- f. Develop an externally-reviewed and externally-equated "authentic" assessment that will provide credible accountability information to the public.

6. **Require consistency:** ensure that faculties “agree to agree” about using shared grading criteria and standards for assessing similar work.

Key to the strategy:

• *ensure that faculties experience what students routinely experience, namely, that teachers often have differing expectations and standards, and give too little objective basis or clear rationale for their grading practices*

Tactics:

- a. Agree that some major assignments will be collectively scored by faculty from across schools and grades, using the same scoring criteria and standards.
- b. Establish one or two common performance and/or portfolio tasks to be required of all students as an exit-level requirement, scored collaboratively.
- c. Have school leaders gather to review (and report to the faculty) on the quality of teacher grading and feedback in their area (with names of teachers and students unknown).
- d. Develop an assessment and grading policy statement that will provide students and parents with clear, common guidelines on how all tests should be designed to be valid, and how grades should be calculated to align with district objectives.
- e. Establish some tests or evaluations where student work is read “blind” by judges other than the classroom teacher.
- f. Provide frequent, sanctioned opportunities for students to provide feedback about the fairness and appropriateness of teacher tests and grades.
- g. Establish grading reliability standards, i.e. the “tolerance” margin of scoring differences between teachers that will be allowed on the same work.

7. **Know your “institutional customers” expectations:** assess from the vantage point of the standards in force at the “next” level, and at your most valued institutional customers. (Know with specificity the standards facing your former students).

Key to the strategy:

• *getting faculties to see the actual requirements for success in valued programs and employment for their graduates*

Tactics:

- a. Collect samples of assessments and graded student work from best programs and schools to which your graduates go.
- b. Organize a field trip to local colleges and employers to witness and discuss their operational standards, the tasks that face them, the resources available, etc.
- c. Develop a performance assessment where students have their work assessed by faculty/staff/employers at next level, grade, school, etc.
- d. Develop a committee composed, in part, of local people in the professions, trades and universities to provide an external review of local "standards and measures". Ask them to occasionally score important samples of student work, and compare their evaluation with teacher evaluation.

8. **Make "form follow function"**: Find the necessary time to do assessment properly - by re-deploying time and personnel. Make the schedule changes incrementally, as needed.

Key to the strategy:

- *challenging deep-seated assumptions about the use of time; and the construction of schedules around the week as unit of analysis, and planned a year in advance*

Tactics:

- a. Do a time-needs analysis by team, grade-level or department. Find out how many non-contact hours would be needed for the design, de-bugging, use, and scoring of performance-based student assessment.
- b. Begin with an arbitrary but feasible goal: develop a year's schedule in which eight half-days of non-contact time are found for first-year faculty work on assessment reform.
- c. Since assessment occurs in cycles, develop a calendar that reflects those cycles (i.e. new, different kinds of "weeks" in the schedule that occur only during every six or eight weeks).
- d. Challenge the assumption that courses need to meet every day. (Look at the collegiate model).

- e. Challenge the assumption that only the classroom teacher, only teachers, and only school personnel should score student work.
- f. Challenge the assumption that all students in a classroom, all courses, all departments, all grades, etc. have to be tested simultaneously.

9. **Establish an interdependent set of R & D task forces**, working in parallel on reform issues, each task force reporting to the others and to a steering committee (made up, in part, of representatives from each task force).

Key to the strategy:

- *avoiding typical committee gridlock and "turf" defense*
- *ensuring that no committee can do its work without updates on work of other committees*
- *requiring each committee to answer specific questions that lead to specific data collection, research, experimentation, and a final report with recommendations to the steering committee*
- *setting firm, short due dates for final reports*

Tactics:

- a. Focus the work of each group by using such titles for groups as: post-graduation committee, pre-matriculation committee, community standards committee, etc.
- b. Insist that each committee use one or more of the tactics in the previous eight points to ensure that their work is grounded in data. Rather than proposing glib solutions, each group should be establishing with precision the nature of the current state of affairs (especially problems) with respect to their topic.
- c. Encourage each group to write its report in such a way that more than one solution is proposed. A more effective tactic is for each group to construct an RFP (a Request for Proposals) that provides opportunities and incentives for any faculty member(s) to propose solutions to the key problems identified by each task force.

10. **Establish an explicit system-wide set of assessment principles and criteria,** for design of, purchase and/or use of, results in all student evaluation.

Key to the strategy:

- *making it clear that assessment must be done according to appropriate criteria and rules for validity, reliability, fairness, rigor, and usefulness*
- *establishing clear boundaries between necessary standards and discretionary practice by individual teachers*

Tactics:

- a. Develop a district-wide and building-wide committee system to formulate a policy statement on the purpose, nature, and exemplary use of assessment instruments and information.
- b. Ask faculty by department, team or grade to study current practice in assessment (by survey, discussion, etc.) and to make recommendations to one another about necessary uniformity.
- c. Study policy statements from other districts and other countries, and ask faculty to react to them.
- d. Study "who is now" vs. "who ought to be" the primary "customer" for assessment data -- if the aim of assessment is improved performance -- and what the different (and conflicting) needs might be between primary and secondary "customers".

11. **Make collaborative faculty assessment of student performance a system-wide priority** (out of which would grow both published standards and sustained professional development in assessment).

Key to the strategy:

- *making on-going professional development the natural result of an exemplary assessment process (instead of isolated in-service work)*
- *getting faculty to provide students, parents, and community members with a published handbook of exemplary student work, with commentary*

Tactics:

- a. Develop a district-wide publication of exemplary and not-so-exemplary work, with commentary, as a way of communicating with clarity standards and expectations of student performance.
- b. Encourage faculty to volunteer for district-wide assessment scoring to ensure that more and more faculty share the same standards and criteria in grading similar work.

12. Research into individual teacher practice.

Tactics:

- a. What are the most and least revealing assessments you use? By what criteria are you judging the choices, i.e. what do you call "revealing"?
- b. What are the most engaging assessments? What are the indicators?
- c. "What works?" Model the soliciting and using of feedback: Get feedback from students on the effectiveness of your instruction, assessments, and feedback.
 - What was the most effective coaching, guidance, and feedback you gave students in the past year - in their view?
 - What did students think was the most/least challenging assessments you gave this year? What did they think were the most/least fair assessments?
 - What do they think are the most effective preparations/rehearsals and assessments?

13. Change the typical (inauthentic) contextual constraints or limits on resources during assessment.

Tactics:

- a. Write the exam/final assessment before teaching a unit/course, then provide students with an overview of the "final" tasks/questions/portfolio guidelines from the first day of instruction.
- b. Allow students to bring all notes to a test or exam.

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- c. Allow - encourage- students, as part of an assessment, to solicit and consider feedback from peers. Judge their work not merely on content and skill but their ability to revise and produce quality work, based on self-assessment, peer critique, and self-adjustment.

- d. Provide students with training in how to evaluate and score the work that they must eventually produce. (Train them as if they were adult judges).