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**Common Formative and Summative Assessments:  
A Brief Overview of What the Research Says...**

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## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

### Common Formative and Summative Assessments

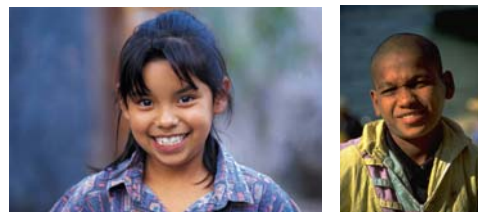
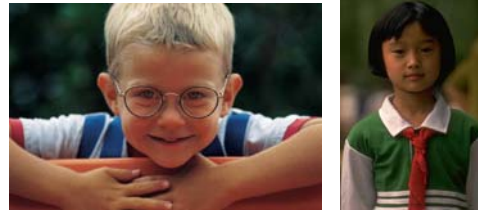
#### What are Common Assessments?

When we think of common assessments, we often think of the High-Stakes Tests like Michigan's MEAP or Indiana's I-Step where all of the students at a grade level take the same test. Then the results of all the individual tests are analyzed using the same criteria and are reported back to all stakeholders in a predetermined way, so that everyone has a common understanding of their meaning. This type of commonality is at the heart of common assessments.

Of course high-stakes tests are not the only example of common assessments nor should common assessments be limited to them. In fact, "in a study of 18 states with high-stakes testing programs, the learning levels of the students in all but one of the states were at the same level as before the testing policies were implemented (Amrein & Berliner, 2002)" (qtd. in Meisels, Atkins-Burnett, Xue, Nicholson, Bickel, and Son 2003), so the true strength of common assessments is not found in high-stakes testing, but is found when common assessments are used

correctly within the classroom. In fact, there is much evidence showing that what happens within the classroom has the most impact on student learning (Marzano and Marzano, 2003). This includes the way we use common assessments.

For common assessments to be truly effective at the school and classroom level, we must do more than just give our students the same tests.



All of the students in that state—at that grade level—take the same test

We must work together to compare the results of the assessments with our colleagues. As Dufour says, this process is important because "schools cannot achieve the systematic, results-oriented collaboration that impacts

## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

teacher practice unless teachers have both comparative student achievement data and collegial support...Indeed teachers may work together to identify common outcomes and develop common assessments. If, however, each teacher has access only to the results of his or her students, without any comparison to other students in the school, team members will not be able to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of their individual instruction" (DuFour Summer 2003) or have the type of impact on student achievement that would otherwise be possible.



Since it is our goal to impact student achievement and increase student

learning, we need to think beyond high-stakes testing to focus on turning all of the formative and summative assessments that we use in the classroom into common assessments because if "when we think of assessments, we...think beyond unit tests in the back of a textbook...(and) think in terms of products and performances that document our students' learning that show their ability to utilize the concepts and processes that they need to master

the standards" ( Marzano, 1999) and use that to design our assessments and then compare these results as a grade level team or professional learning community, our assessments and the way we use them can have a positive affect on student achievement. This is especially true if we use common assessments on an ongoing basis.



When we do, "teachers make the learning process more transparent by establishing and

communicating learning goals, tracking student progress and,... comparing their assessments with other teachers to ensure that they are treating students equitably" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005).

Simultaneously, students have a clearer idea of what is expected of them because



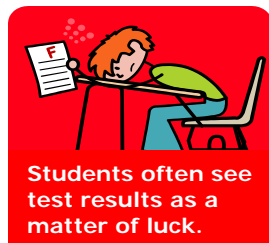
the expectations do not change from classroom to classroom. This clearer vision increases their chances of being successful learners. This is key since "we must build classroom environments in which students use

## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

assessments to understand what success looks like and how to do better the next time" (Stiggins, 2004). Common assessments do that. In fact, research indicates that using standards-based *common formative* and *summative assessments* can have a major positive impact on increased student achievement.

### What are Summative and Formative Assessments?

Assessments fall into a type of continuum based upon their intended use. If they are intended to be an assessment of student *learning* like a quiz or an end of the unit test, then they are a *summative assessment*, an assessment we use to judge how much a student has learned after instruction or after interaction with instructional resources.



This type of assessment should sound familiar to all of us because most of the assessments used in schools are comprised of chapter and unit tests, which are designed to assess how much of the content the students can recall after instruction (Wiggins and

McTighe, 2005; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999).

Once the students have taken this type of test, we usually assign them a letter grade based upon how well they did on the assessment. Then we move on to the next instructional unit, so the assessment or data derived from the assessment has little way to increase student learning because the learning has already occurred.

In fact, this type of feedback can have a negative impact on student achievement by making the students feel like they do not know how to succeed. "Students succeed academically only if they want to succeed and feel capable of doing so.



If they lack either desire or confidence, they will not be successful.

Therefore, the essential question is a dual one: How do we help our students want to learn and feel capable of learning?" (Stiggins (Assessment, Student Confidence, and Student Success, 1999). It is obvious that summative assessments may not hold the answer to this dilemma, but perhaps the other end of the assessment continuum does.

## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

On the other end of this continuum are *formative assessments*, ongoing assessments that are used to inform instruction and increase student learning by providing the students with vital insights and understandings of their own learning needs and styles. While the term *formative assessments* is currently being applied to three different approaches—these include: more frequently given benchmark tests, more efficient data management, and *assessment for learning—assessment for learning* is the most effective for our purposes (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2005). “The biggest difference between the first two...approaches and *assessment for learning* is that the former two inform teachers about the current status of student achievement, whereas the latter also informs students about their own learning. *Assessment for learning* rests on the understanding that students are data-driven decision makers, too—a perspective all but ignored in our assessment legacy and in previous approaches to school improvement” (Stiggins and Chappuis, 2005).

This differentiation is especially important when we consider our need to be more learner-focused—to create a *learner-centered school* where

everything we do is focused upon increased student learning. In this type of school, assessments are used as tools for learning—where ongoing and embedded formative assessments inform daily instructional decisions (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Shulman, 1987) and student learning. Therefore, for our purposes, from this point forward, when we refer to formative assessments, we will be referring to *assessments for learning*.



This does not mean that we should abandon more frequent benchmark testing or effective data management. Nor does it mean we should give up all summative assessments. Summative assessments serve an important purpose. However, for learning to happen for all students there needs to be a disproportionate balance between summative and formative assessments with far more formative assessments happening to inform instruction and help direct student learning.

### Why Use Formative Assessments?

Research collected by Organization for Economic Co-operation and

## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

Development's Center for Educational Research and Innovation's Brief says that the "***achievement gains*** associated with formative assessment have been described as 'among the largest ever reported for educational interventions'...(and) formative assessment also ***improves equity of student outcomes***. Schools which use formative assessment show not only general gains in academic achievement, but also particularly high gains for previously underachieving students. Attendance and retention of learning are also improved, as well as the quality of students' work" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). In fact, "studies have demonstrated that assessment *for* learning rivals some one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of that assessment particularly benefits the achievement of low performing students. The latter finding has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between minorities and other students" (Stiggins, 2004).

Formative assessments make a difference by involving the student in the assessment process—from beginning to the end of instruction—the student is actively involved not

only in learning but in learning how to learn. "Formative assessment *builds students' "learning to learn" skills* by emphasizing the process of teaching and learning, and involving students as partners in that process. It also builds students' skills at peer-assessment and self-assessment, and helps them develop a range of effective learning strategies" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). This means that "*Assessment for Learning* turns the classroom assessment process and its results into an instructional intervention designed to increase, not merely monitor, student learning...and...the students become consumers of assessment information too, using evidence of their own progress to understand what comes next for them" (Stiggins, 2005). Rick Stiggins says when, "*Assessment for learning* happens in the classroom...(it) involves students in every aspect of their own assessment to build their confidence and maximize their achievement. It rests on the understanding that students, not just adults, are data-driven instructional decision makers"



## Common Formative and Summative Assessment: A Brief Overview...

(Stiggins, 2002). To engage in this process, teachers do the following:

- ✚ “State standards are deconstructed into classroom-level learning targets, which we translate into language our students understand so they know what they are responsible for learning” (Stiggins, 2002).
- ✚ “Classroom-level targets (are turned) into dependably accurate classroom assessments, aspects of which we integrate into daily instruction” (Stiggins, 2002).
- ✚ “Everyone understands the definition of success from the outset and we generate an ongoing flow of descriptive feedback that permits students to watch themselves grow” (Stiggins, 2002).
- ✚ “Students and their teachers become partners in the classroom assessment process, relying on student-involved assessment, record keeping, and communication to help students understand what success looks like, see where they are now, and learn to close the gap between the two” (Stiggins, 2002).

In looking at this list, it is easy to see why formative assessments make the impact they do. As Stiggins says, “We can realize unprecedented gains in achievement if we turn the current day-to-day classroom assessment process into a more powerful tool for learning. We know that schools will be held accountable for raising test scores. Now we must provide teachers with the assessment tools needed to do the job” (Stiggins, 2002). One of these tools, perhaps the main one, is formative assessment, defined here as *assessment for learning*.

Since we already do lots of summative assessment, it is time we focus on doing more common formative assessment given the fact that common formative assessments allow us meet regularly in grade level teams to look at student work and use the results to improve our lessons while instruction is still in progress. Therefore, our instruction can better meet our students' needs. Thus it helps keep teachers and students focused on the same goals and on the specific areas where students need more help at the very time they need it (Schmoker, 2003).

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