

School improvement

Assessment for learning

School improvement is the second in a series of professional development experiences on **Assessment for learning**. It is based on two readings written by Rick Stiggins and Stephen Chappuis. *School improvement* provides a snapshot of these readings and some questions to consider.

The full readings are available at the given website.

References

Chappuis, S. 2004, "Leading Assessment for Learning: Using classroom assessment in school improvement", *Insight*, p18(3), 18–22: <<http://ati.pearson.com/tools-resources/papers.html>>.

Stiggins, R. 2004, "New Assessment Beliefs for a New School Mission", *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(1), 22–27: <<http://ati.pearson.com/tools-resources/papers.html>>.

A renewed focus on school leadership as a lever for improving student outcomes means that today's leaders must be very clear on which practices do and do not lead to school improvement. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2003)¹ describe this in four knowledge categories: knowing why something is important, knowing what to do about it, knowing how to do it, and knowing when to do it.

Stiggins (2004) urges school leaders to let go of what he refers to as a legacy of mistaken assessment beliefs, and embrace new research which shows that real gains in student learning achievements are within our reach. He cites four commonly held mistaken beliefs and provides grounds for reanalysis.

The first mistaken belief is that funding targeted at high-stakes, standardised testing would lead us to believe that this style of assessment is good for all students and motivates them to learn. The reality is far from the truth. High-stakes standardised testing motivates those who know they will do well if they study to learn — possibly the kind of students our politicians who enforce this thinking were! Those students who have already experienced failure in the school system will not be motivated by high-stakes standardised testing and, in fact, when they see the standards being raised are more likely to give up hope altogether. This was reasonable in previous times; in fact the bell curve demanded there be as many losers as there were winners in the school system.

Today, however, when the mission for schools has changed and all students are required to meet minimum standards, school leaders must ensure that their students do not give up. Eliminating all high-stakes standardised testing is not plausible or even desirable, as they have their place in the assessment picture. The answer is to ensure that standardised tests are balanced with high-quality internal assessment which provides the rest of the picture for students and teachers to gain a clearer understanding of how learning is progressing.

¹ Waters, J., Marzano, R., and McNulty, B. 2003, "Balanced leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement", *Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory*: Aurora, Colorado.

The second mistaken belief that Stiggins points out is that it is the instructional decisions of teachers that contribute the most to student learning and school effectiveness. This particular belief drives an emphasis on data collection and accountability. In reality, both students and teachers share responsibility for the learning. The teacher sets up the learning process and experiences but students choose whether they wish to engage. Students who have experienced chronic failure in the school system often do not want to engage. To re-engage, these students need to feel that they can succeed and that participating in the learning process will make a difference to them. Student re-engagement occurs when students have shared ownership of assessment feedback and results, setting their own targets and standards and having confidence that, with the teacher as partner, they have the information and the tools to succeed.

The third mistaken belief is that instructional decisions that have the greatest impact on student learning are those made once a year. This manifests itself in the funding, time and energy spent on external tests. Schools need to ensure that equal investment is made in high-quality internal school-based assessment practices which provide frequent, valid and reliable information to teachers and students for the purpose of making decisions about student learning needs — this has the greatest impact.

The fourth mistaken belief — that testing is the domain of professional test designers, not teachers and school leaders in schools — needs to be challenged. The emphasis on external testing to validate learning shows ²a fundamental lack of trust in teachers and school leaders to accurately assess the achievement of their students. Schools need to regain control of assessment by ensuring all teachers have the knowledge and skills to design and select valid and reliable assessment instruments, interpret and share assessment results with others including students and parents, and use the data to inform future curriculum decision-making. The results from the external tests would then assume their rightful place as another piece of information contributing to the picture of each student's learning journey.

For schools to redress these issues, certain **leadership competencies** are required. Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter and Chappuis (2004) ³ have developed a framework for leaders which is specific to creating an environment conducive to *assessment for learning*.

The framework comprises the following ten competencies:

1. The leader understands the standards of quality for student assessments and how to verify their use in the school/district assessments.
2. The leader understands the principles of assessment for learning and works with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction.
3. The leader understands the necessity of clear academic achievement targets, aligned classroom-level achievement targets, and their relationship to the development of accurate assessments.
4. The leader knows and can evaluate the teacher's classroom assessment competencies and helps teachers learn to assess accurately and use the results productively.

² Stiggins, R. 2004, "New Assessment Beliefs for a New School Mission", *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(1), 22–27

³ Chappuis, S., Stiggins, R., Arter, J. and Chappuis, J. 2003, "Assessment for learning: An action guide for school leaders". Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute

5. The leader can plan, present and/or secure professional development activities that contribute to the use of sound assessment practices.
6. The leader accurately analyses student assessment information, uses the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.
7. The leader can develop and implement sound assessment and assessment-related policies.
8. The leader creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and can communicate effectively with all members of the school community about student assessment results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction.
9. The leader understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system.
10. The leader understands the issues related to unethical and inappropriate use of student assessment and protects students and staff from such misuse.

Research relating to the impact of high-stakes standardised tests on student learning documents just one study in which slight gains were recorded as a result. Conversely a number of studies have documented that effective classroom assessment, or assessment *for* learning, has resulted in improvement of a half to a full standard deviation in subsequent assessment *of* learning. This remarkable difference could result in gains of 30 percentile points in commonly used standardised tests. Even more significant for school leaders focusing on school improvement is that the gains were greatest for low achievers meaning that the range of achievement was narrowed whilst raising achievement overall.

School leaders need to know why assessment is important, what to do to implement a balanced assessment approach in their schools, how to achieve this balance and when each assessment type is needed so that they can set clear standards that are understood by all and support teachers, parents and students to play their part in an ethical assessment system which leads to school improvement.

Key ideas

- Improving leadership knowledge and skill is being used as a strategy directly aimed at raising student achievement.
- There is no clear evidence that high-stakes testing alone will raise student achievement.
- There is clear evidence that assessment *for* learning raises student achievement.
- Specific leadership competencies, grounded in strong beliefs about the role assessment can play in student motivation and learning, can result in significant gains in student achievement.
- Assessment practices reflect beliefs about student learning in a culture conducive to assessment *for* learning.

Questions to consider:

1. How do you currently measure school improvement?
2. Do the processes you use and the information/data that is collected tell you the whole story?
3. What assessment practices are occurring in your school/faculty?
4. How well do these assessment practices support student achievement/school improvement?
5. Review the ten leadership competencies. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? How might you share your strengths and reduce the weaknesses?
6. What more do you need to know? How will you find out?
7. What will you do first to enhance assessment practices/school improvement in your school context?