

The Assessment Puzzle

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If one believes journal articles and presentations at language arts conferences today, most language arts curriculum leaders believe that new forms of assessment are essential to the improvement of instruction. Most of the calls for new assessment endorse performance and portfolio tests and the elimination of multiple-choice tests.

There is no question that excellent language arts assessment programs must include multiple samples of student work, gathered under a variety of conditions, and gathered in different ways. This more broadly based assessment will help students reflect about their own literacy development, aid teachers with planning, provide parents with understandable information about their children's language development, and give school administrators, board members, and citizens the information they need about the success of their schools' language arts programs.

Yet, the assessments that continue to dominate language arts programs are norm-referenced, multiple-choice tests. Such assessments are not adequate by themselves, and many argue they should be replaced by portfolios, teacher/student literacy conferences, written think-alongs, free-writes, work samples, and student self-assessment. We have an ample assortment of alternative assessment techniques, and yet they do not seem to have become viable school or district indicators of success. Why not?

The problem is that language arts assessment programs resemble a bunch of unassembled puzzle pieces. One

typical piece of the puzzle is the state tests; another, the district tests. Other pieces include basal reader tests, Chapter 1 tests, portfolios kept by teachers, and performance assessment. In too many schools and districts, language arts assessments do not form a coherent plan. The district test director selects a district test, the Chapter 1 committee selects a test, and the principal and teachers often decide whether or not to use the basal reader tests. Portfolios and performance assessments bubble up from teacher dissatisfaction with the traditional tests or are foisted on language arts programs by administrators who believe that these new forms of assessment are exactly the medicine needed by ailing language arts programs.

Proponents of each form of assessment argue vehemently, and the public joins the fray. In a recent column, George Will favored a results-oriented assessment of education: that is, a nonsense, right-answer, norm-referenced test.

Many educators couldn't agree less with Will. They don't think assessment should be a sorting process. They want assessments that guide rather than judge, and many feel that "right answers" are anathema to understanding. They want opportunities to find out whether students can create their own answers, choose their own reading and writing activities, and select their own basis for assessment.

Getting the pieces of the puzzle together is essential if we are to get on with the task of using assessment results to plan effective instruction. There must be one central focus for putting the puzzle together—*assessment must serve students*. If an assessment does not provide useful and valid information about how a student uses language, it should not be administered.

Beyond that consideration, four audiences also need to know how students are learning to read and write. These audiences are (in order of importance):

1. **Students** need to know what it is they are supposed to be learning. They

need to be given useful guidance so they can take responsibility for improving. They need to reflect about their own reading and writing, and they need to talk with a perceptive teacher. The norm-referenced scores from traditional tests are of no use to students.

2. **Parents** need to know the reading and writing their children can do so they can provide help and encouragement. Norm-referenced tests are of limited use to parents, especially since such scores are so difficult to understand.

3. **Teachers** need to know what they can do to help students become proficient language users. Norm-referenced test results provide some useful information for teachers, but these results are not adequate for the instructional decisions teachers need to make.

4. **Decision makers**—including superintendents, boards of education, tax-payers, citizen groups, and legislators—have a vital interest in the schools. They too need information for making plans to improve educational programs. These external decision-makers need to know how students compare to those in other districts across their state and the nation. They understand that students must have the language skills that will allow them to participate effectively in an ever more competitive world.

Obviously, no single form of assessment will provide the information needed by each of the four audiences above. The strident debates in which the participants accuse one another of destroying education help no one. We need to come together to develop assessment plans that provide useful, practical, realistic information so that we can get on with the teaching task. Assessment must not remain a set of jumbled puzzle pieces. □

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