In The Perfect Assessment System, Rick Stiggins calls for the ground-up redevelopment of assessment in U.S. education. Speaking from more than 40 years of experience in the field—and speaking for all learners who hope to succeed, the teachers who want them to succeed, and the local school leaders whose aspirations for success have been thwarted by assessment traditions—Stiggins maps out the adjustments in practice and culture necessary to generate both accurate accountability data and the specific evidence of individual mastery that supports sound instructional decision making and better learning. He addresses

- **ASSESSMENT PURPOSE**—how (and why) to clarify the reason for every assessment and the users it will serve.
- **LEARNING TARGETS TO BE ASSESSED**—how to make sure we focus on the right competencies and set consistent definitions of success.
- **ASSESSMENT QUALITY**—how to ensure every assessment, at every level, is an excellent one.
- **COMMUNICATION OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS**—how to share information in ways that best support diverse purposes.
- **ASSESSMENT IMPACT**—how to link assessment to truly productive, universal student motivation.

We have not yet begun to explore assessment’s true potential to enhance both school quality and student well-being. Stiggins kicks off this critical conversation and charts a course for a new system that promises much higher levels of student success at a fraction of our current testing costs. The door is open for assessment reform; here is a bold plan for getting it right.

It’s time to move our assessment practices from the 1950s to the century we’re living in. It’s time to invest in our teachers and local school leaders instead of in more tests. It’s time to help all students understand how to unleash their strengths and gain a sense of themselves as learners capable of choosing their own paths to success.
THE PERFECT ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

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History tells us that the status quo simply loves to be preserved. Our inclination to avoid messing with the status quo is confirmed when we hear such adages as “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” or “The old ways are the good ways.” Most people, it appears, prefer things to stay pretty much the way they currently are.

The attitude most authors take toward educational testing in the United States bears this out. It’s apparent in the suggestions that mildly miffed critics of our assessment system offer for attainable yet modest improvements. “Tinker with the status quo ever so lightly,” they say, “but don’t seriously depart from it.”

But a genuinely vexed author, one who is fundamentally fed up with the status quo, is sometimes driven to advocate jettisoning an entire enterprise and boldly starting afresh. That’s what Rick Stiggins does, and with gusto, in this exciting denunciation of what he regards as our obsolete school testing system. Based on a four-decade career soaking in educational assessment’s status quo, he has now concluded its shortcomings are so severe that what we need is nothing short of a complete reinvention of testing culture and practices.

As Stiggins makes clear early on, the many misuses of educational tests are now suffocating us to such a degree that it’s time to start over. After laying out a litany of deficits in the way we currently use tests in our districts, schools, and classrooms, he identifies a set of “troubling realities” that have
triggered those problems. But then—and this represents his book’s chief contribution—Stiggins provides the framework for a do-over: an approach to testing that he modestly labels the perfect assessment system. The remainder of the book is devoted to a crisp spell-out of what this perfection looks like and what it would take for us to achieve it.

I know Rick Stiggins well and have for a long time. We first met about 40 years ago and, as fate would dictate, we now live about 15 minutes from each other just south of Portland, Oregon. Given that proximity, we meet about once a month over breakfast to exchange views on the current crises in the educational testing world. (For the record, I end up paying for breakfast more than 75 percent of the time—a statistically significant difference.) And so I know with certainty that when he describes his recommended approach to school testing as the perfect assessment system, he recognizes the challenge of installing even an improved testing system, much less a perfect one.

What he presents to us in this thought-provoking book is a vision of perfection—one that supplies tangible targets for those who wish to bring about a transformation of today’s educational testing, and one with a simplicity that belies its potential to enhance student well-being.

The foundation for his perfect assessment system is Stiggins’s conviction that the purpose of assessment must always be clear. What will this test be measuring? Will the results be used to support student learning, or will the results be used to certify whether or not learning has occurred? Who will use the results, and what decisions will they make based on these results? If these questions seem like obvious ones, remember that, in this nation, we have leaned heavily on large-scale standardized tests for almost a full century, yet enormous confusion persists regarding whether educational tests are really intended to support learning or to evaluate instructional quality. For Stiggins, designation of purpose—and a corollary isolation of the decisions to be influenced by test results—is mandatory.

His vision includes several other ingredients beyond purpose determination. One of these is the requirement that all educational tests satisfy standards of assessment quality so that the evidence these tests elicit will be defensibly accurate. Stiggins spells out clearly what’s needed for a test to elicit
accurate evidence of students’ achievement—whether that test is administered at the state, district, or classroom level. Moreover, he wants educators and policymakers to be sufficiently assessment literate so that they can not only gauge the quality of the educational tests being used but also accurately interpret the results those tests yield.

Further, Stiggins’s conception of a perfect assessment enterprise incorporates time-tested principles of effective communication. He advocates that teachers and school administrators acquire sufficient levels of assessment literacy so that they can communicate students’ test results in a truly comprehensible manner to parents, to the public, and to all others who rely on such test-based evidence.

And finally, invoking a theme that has governed his thinking for most of his career, Stiggins wants us to make sure that our assessment practices are linked to students’ motivation in a manner that engenders student self-esteem rather than damages it. More than any other writer, Stiggins has reminded us over the years that if our educational tests lead too many students to conclude that they’re not smart or capable enough and that school success is hopelessly out of their reach, then the entire use of educational testing is dysfunctional. This book’s focus on using classroom tests for students’ learning rather than as tests of students’ learning is a helpful reminder.

Rick Stiggins was trained as a traditional educational measurement specialist at Michigan State University, one of the United States’ strongest centers of graduate psychometric training. Yet, after a decade or so of traditional measurement work, his attention shifted from large-scale testing to studying the instructional dividends of classroom assessment. Indeed, for several decades, while the educational measurement community was caught up with the high-stakes applications of large-scale standardized testing, Stiggins almost single-handedly championed the instructional dividends of appropriate teacher-made classroom testing. Here he maintains, rightfully, that the most powerful assessment-informed decisions are those made in the classroom and calls for a system designed, above all, to support the work of teachers and their students.
The lessons learned from an entire career in educational testing have been coalesced effectively in *The Perfect Assessment System*’s call for an across-the-board assessment revolution. It is time, Stiggins asserts, to discard testing’s traditional “best practices” and start again—from scratch.

Only frustrated and angry writers are willing to dump the status quo so totally in a quest for something better. Thank heavens Rick Stiggins is sufficiently frustrated and angry.

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CONFRONTING OUR ASSESSMENT CRISIS: IT’S TIME TO START OVER

If measurement is to continue to play an increasingly important role in education, those who measure must be more than technicians. Unless their efforts are directed by a sound educational philosophy, unless they accept and welcome a greater share of responsibility for the selection and clarification of educational objectives, unless they show much more concern with what they measure as well as with how they measure it, much of their work will prove futile and ineffective.

—E. F. LINDQUIST

In this book, I call for the ground-up redevelopment of assessment in American education. I describe why this is necessary and how to go about it in specific detail. But I want readers to understand from the outset both the experiences and resulting value perspectives (perhaps even moral code) that give rise to the vision I present.

First, I was a struggling learner in my public schooling years. My experiences taught me how devastating hopelessness can be in the classroom and why it’s so important for every learner to believe in the possibility of his or her success.

Second, I have spent my career in educational measurement studying and working in classrooms with students and teachers, watching very expensive standardized testing processes unfold in ways that rarely supported the
learning that was going on in those classrooms. Policymakers have paid little attention and allocated virtually no resources in support of the classroom level of assessment, where its power to enhance learning is unlimited.

Third, I have worked extensively with local school leaders as they have tried to succeed in politicized assessment environments within which they have little understanding and over which they have no control. They long for assessment pathways to improved teaching, learning, and student well-being, and they find few.

In this book, I speak for all learners who hope to succeed, for the teachers who want them to succeed, and for local school leaders whose aspirations for success have been thwarted by our assessment traditions.

WHERE WE STAND

Systems of educational testing in U.S. schools are in crisis. Our newest federal school improvement legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), acknowledges as much by inviting state and local educational agencies to explore alternate, innovative uses of assessment. This amounts to a confession that federally mandated assessment practices intended to improve schools are not doing the job. They are compromising student learning and damaging the social institution we call “school.” An assessment crisis that has been simmering for decades is finally boiling over, and the time has come to take overdue and assertive action to improve both specific testing practices and our entire assessment culture.

Just to be clear, the focus of my concern goes far deeper than our national and statewide standardized testing practices, although these certainly are in desperate need of deep rethinking and improvement. However, even more troubling problems plague our local district, school, and classroom assessment systems and practices. Consider the big picture:

• There is a national “opt out” movement led by parents to withdraw their children from high-stakes testing programs because they see no educational value in these tests. These parents fear (and some report) that the emphasis on high-stakes testing is emotionally damaging to their children.
• Parents have filed lawsuits in response to local school administrators’ efforts to punish students who opt out of end-of-year testing by requiring that they repeat the grade regardless of their level of achievement.
• Students who see little instructional relevance in the high-stakes tests they are required to take are protesting with signs that read “Hands up, don’t test” and are refusing to take the tests.
• Issues related to matters of equity are being raised by minority parents and their allies. Some favor annual test-score reporting in order to maintain a spotlight on unequal opportunities for minority children, while others worry about test bias and tests that are insensitive to non-majority cultures.
• Professional educators are losing their jobs and even being sentenced to years in prison for cheating on standardized tests. They claim that their supervisors made them do it.
• States continue to withdraw from multistate assessment consortiums of standardized test development. They are searching for better alternatives.
• Educational policy leaders, such as Achieve and the Council of Chief State School Officers, offer states guidelines for conducting audits of local assessment systems that focus almost exclusively on standardized accountability testing and provide little advice for monitoring the quality of classroom-level assessment, even though the classroom is where the vast majority of assessment takes place.
• Newly minted national standards of test quality developed jointly and promulgated by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (2014) address matters of sound standardized testing and bypass specifics of sound classroom assessment.

These circumstances may have risen, at least in part, from the following troubling realities:

• While ESSA offers assessment flexibility, that flex is in state accountability testing programs, perpetuating the poorly informed, decades-long
federal belief that the best way to use testing to improve schools is to hold schools accountable for raising annual test scores.

• As a result of this kind of federal leadership, an entire generation of school leaders and policymakers have come to see assessment primarily as an accountability tool instead of a powerful means of supporting student learning.

• Most teachers—novices and veterans alike—have not been given the opportunity to understand or to learn to apply basic principles of sound classroom assessment.

• Preparation programs for school administrators remain devoid of relevant, helpful assessment training, leaving teachers with no one to turn to for help if they need or want it.

• Consequently, even though ESSA offers states and local school districts the opportunity to remake their assessment systems in new and productive ways, those who would lead the development and implementation of such potentially exciting systems often lack the assessment literacy needed to do so effectively.

• Naïve federal, state, and local policymakers reveal a profound lack of assessment literacy by setting policies requiring that changes in annual standardized test scores be used to evaluate the performance of teachers and their supervisors despite the fact that this amounts to an indefensible application of those scores for a wide variety of technical and practical reasons (Stiggins, 2014b).

• Since 2010, the United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars developing new multistate standardized tests whose scores are of little direct instructional value. Local teachers, school leaders, and even assessment personnel are struggling to figure out what to do with all these very expensive results (Oregon Department of Education, 2016).

• Test publishers have been bypassing professional educators altogether and selling their products directly to untrained legislators, turning testing into an increasingly political and financial enterprise versus a tool for teaching and learning.
How can something so critical to the success of our schooling process be going so terribly wrong? The simplest answer is that there is a profound lack of understanding of the basic principles of sound assessment practice throughout the fabric of American educational policy and practice. *Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform educational decisions.* Student success hinges on the quality of those decisions, and the quality of those decisions depends on the quality of the evidence (assessment results) upon which they are based. U.S. students are at risk because our national, state, local district, school, and classroom assessment systems very often do not yield the kinds of evidence required for sound instructional decision making where it really matters: in the classroom. Typically, these systems provide only gross indicators of student achievement that cannot inform the classroom-level instructional decisions that truly drive school quality. This has been the case for decades. And yet, over the decades, practitioners and school communities have witnessed layer upon layer of new testing, from local to state to national to international levels. It has come at immense cost, and we have little by way of enhanced student learning to show for it. As a result, the culture surrounding assessment both within and around schools has become increasingly and profoundly toxic and destructive.

**WHAT WE MUST DO**

Based on my 44 years of experience in the measurement field, and in the face of this intensifying upheaval, I have become convinced that our current systems of educational assessment are so flawed at so many levels that they cannot be saved. Unless we act assertively right now to establish the instructional utility and relevance of assessment, we will continue to waste enormous amounts of resources, and the harm done to students and teachers will reach truly perilous levels.

Yet even in the face of this turmoil, we need not and indeed cannot be discouraged. I believe we have not yet begun to explore assessment’s true potential to enhance school quality and student well-being. The future of assessment as a teaching and learning tool can be very bright under the right
conditions. This book details those conditions. They are not currently in place in our schools and have not been for a very long time. But they can be. In the presentation that follows, I will chart a course to a new vision of excellence in assessment that promises much higher levels of student learning success at a fraction of our current testing costs.

Be advised, however, that this success will hinge on our willingness to rethink our practices and make critically important investments at two levels of our assessment infrastructure:

1. **We will need to rethink why we assess, what we assess, how we assess it, and what we do with the results.** We must fundamentally reconsider the specific strategies and tactics that define assessment in our schools.

2. **We will need to address the assessment culture—the social and educational environment—within which we will carry out these reconsidered assessment strategies and tactics.** In other words, we must assess well within the context of our societal and educational aspirations, values, and beliefs so as to promote a universal opportunity for learner success, regardless of the learner's social or economic background.

Just imagine what might happen if we broke the old molds of large-scale accountability testing, college admissions testing, and even classroom testing for grading purposes and redeveloped them from the ground up to be the very best they can be at promoting student learning. What might we create for the sake of school quality and student success if we built an entirely new assessment culture for American schools? What positive and productive systems would we create to satisfy the information needs of all instructional decision makers? What if we reversed our priorities and used assessment to support teaching and learning first and foremost while still managing to satisfy our accountability needs? What if these systems didn’t just identify educational problems but also helped solve them? Bottom line: If we were unconstrained by our historic testing legacy, what kind of system might we create, and how would it fit within our schooling processes?
WHAT WILL A TRULY PRODUCTIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

The assessment system I advocate is relatively easy to describe. But its apparent simplicity should not lead us to underestimate its power to enhance not only student learning but also student well-being. As you will see, putting in place the conditions necessary to use assessment in all of its potentially powerful ways will require considerable investment in our teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and parent communities.

To begin with, a truly productive system will arise from a new culture in which there will never be confusion about our assessment purposes. In every context, we will know why we are assessing student achievement: either to (a) support student learning or (b) judge and report the sufficiency of that learning. Assessors at all levels and in all contexts will declare the instructional decision makers they intend to inform before they begin the assessment process. They will proceed with their assessment only when they know with certainty who will use the results to inform what decisions and, therefore, what information their assessment must be designed and built to provide. Our assessment systems across all levels of use, from the classroom to the boardroom, will serve all instructional decision makers, not just once a year but throughout instruction—before, during, and after the learning. To repeat for emphasis, regardless of the context, the specific purpose of each assessment will always be clear for and endorsed by all involved.

In the assessment future I am envisioning, we will make absolutely certain that all of our valued learning targets are clear and appropriate for the intended learners. This is as essential a foundation for sound assessment as it is for good teaching and learning! The traditional practice of creating tests that thinly sample broad domains of achievement standards will be replaced by assessments that tell us how each student is doing in mastering each priority achievement standard. This will be a completely standards-referenced assessment system informing us on all occasions and in all contexts what comes next in every student’s learning. We will agree once and for all on the learning targets that we hold as important for our children and on how
to assess these in instructionally relevant ways. Some achievement standards will be endorsed as important across an entire state, others by local districts, and still others by individual teachers. And, regardless of their complexity, all standards will be assessed accurately by selecting from the full range of available assessment methods.

In other words, all assessments—whether classroom assessments, interim benchmark tests, or annual tests—will meet standards of quality so as to yield dependable evidence to inform sound and productive instructional decision making. As a result, teachers, school leaders, parents, and students themselves will have confidence in both the utility and the benefit of assessment in all contexts.

We will lay the foundation of this system by making sure everyone involved, educator and policymaker alike, is sufficiently assessment literate to understand what it means to use assessment to protect and promote the well-being of students. Those who assess will know what assessment method to use when, and how to use it to yield dependable results and to help all students believe success is within reach if they keep striving. Schools and the communities they belong to will collaborate to discover and minimize the sources of bias and cultural insensitivity that can distort assessment results.

We will build our new system around principles of effective communication of assessment results, ensuring that those who receive the results will understand them completely and be able to use them as the catalyst for productive action. We will end a long history of sending periodic test scores or report card grades to people who have no idea what they mean, how to interpret them, or how to act on them appropriately. Practitioners will be sufficiently assessment literate to understand that feedback to students intended to promote learning differs from feedback that merely reports the sufficiency of that learning with a grade or score. We will make sure assessors convey only truly useful information that fits the instructional context.

And finally, we will link our assessment practices to student motivation in constructive ways that keep all students believing success is within reach if they keep striving for it. This means we will re-evaluate traditional reward-and punishment-driven “motivational practices” that have the effect of
discouraging major segments of our student population. Fear and intimidation will give way to confidence and hope as the new emotional dynamics underpinning student motivation and learning success. The result will be an open learning environment full of equal learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of background. This represents the most profound shift in our assessment culture. In the future, we will embrace principles of assertive “assessment FOR learning” alongside assessment of learning.

In short, we will never again have to worry about testing the right “common core” things or if there’s “too much standardized testing” going on. We won’t be wondering if educators are cheating to inflate test scores or if some students are being cheated out of their opportunity for success. Policymakers will not be grasping clumsily at the wrong testing straws and setting truly damaging policies due to their lack of assessment literacy. In our new assessment culture, we will start over, and universal assessment competence and confidence will rule—just the opposite of circumstances today—because we will invest in it.

We know how to make all of this happen, because enlightened colleagues from countries whose assessment traditions are different from ours, as well as many outstanding teachers across the United States, have helped us summon and focus this vision of relevant, helpful assessment from the fog of assessment chaos and bewilderment. It is a vision that holds immense promise for our students. But to get there we must scrap current assessment practices and replace them with a new assessment culture of innovative priorities, policies, and practices. I call it the “perfect assessment system,” and I’ve chosen this specific label for two reasons. First, I wanted to hold myself to the very highest standards as I thought through and assembled this system. Second, I believe that what follows is the only assessment plan that can satisfy all of the ideals framed in the above paragraphs.

**WHY MAKE SWEEPING CHANGES NOW?**

For decades we have been guilty of severely restrictive assessment “tunnel vision,” thus failing to recognize, let alone tap, potent new ideas. We have
also left the student as assessment user almost entirely out of our assessment equation. These are shameful realities we cannot ignore any longer, and there are many reasons why.

**Reason 1: Schools Have a New Mission, Which Demands a New Assessment Vision.**

Historically, a primary social mission of our schools has been to begin the process of sorting citizens into the various segments of our social and economic system by ranking them based on achievement by the end of high school. Assessment’s traditional role has been to provide the evidence needed to grade and sort. However, due to the rapid evolution of our society in recent decades, that mission has expanded to include holding schools accountable for helping “every student succeed” at mastering the essential, lifelong learner proficiencies needed to thrive in society. Schools have been charged with making sure that all students, not just those at the top of the rank order, are ready for college and workplace training. Educators are being ordered to narrow achievement gaps among various subpopulations of our student body and reduce dropout rates. To achieve these goals, we must transform assessment from a one-dimensional source of evidence for sorting into a multi-dimensional tool for teaching and learning capable of motivating all students to aspire to and become capable lifelong learners.

**Reason 2: We Have Failed to Clearly or Completely Define “Academic Success.”**

Our assessment traditions have not defined the meaning of academic success clearly, completely, or in practical terms, and this has had profound instructional implications.

First, those traditions have defined learning outcomes in terms of broad achievement domains. A domain is a large collection of learning targets to which we assign labels such as “reading,” “math,” “science,” “language arts,” and so on. Typically, domain labels include a grade-level reference, such as “3rd grade reading” or “5th grade math.” Each domain includes targets that might be covered in a year of instruction or more.
To measure student achievement over that span, assessors write test items that provide a representative sample of the learning targets within domains. The test scores generated are intended to serve as evidence of learning and support general inferences regarding student mastery of the domain sampled. I emphasize general because this is a critical point. Test scores do not and currently cannot support conclusions about student mastery of any of the individual learning targets within the domain.

A variation on this theme has emerged in recent years, with learning targets taking the form of lists of achievement standards, and assessors writing test exercises to sample this array of standards. Again, the resulting total test score is said to reflect the extent of student mastery of the domain, but again, that test score does not reveal which standards were included on the test and cannot support sound conclusions as to which of the individual standards students have mastered, either individually or collectively.

The instructional implications of this kind of domain-sampling test design for accountability testing are clear. Scores may support inferences about levels of achievement across the domain, but they do not provide the level of detail teachers and students need to act on the results to improve learning. They need to know which targets or standards have been mastered in order to decide what comes next in the learning. As we look to our assessment future, we must build systems that guarantee that detail. The perfect system I envision will do so.

**Reason 3: We Have Never Really Cared About the Quality of Our Assessments.**

A high-quality assessment provides an accurate, dependable representation of student learning and does so in a form that fits the information needs of the intended users. We know how to create good assessments and use them well. The problem is that this wisdom has rarely found its way into our schools and classrooms. We haven’t bothered to provide training in these matters for policymakers, for local school leaders, or for teachers—even though the typical teacher spends as much as a third of his or her professional time engaged in assessment-related activities (Dorr-Bremme & Herman, 1986; Stiggins &
Conklin, 1992). If we really cared about matters of assessment quality, we would have made sure every teacher arrives in the classroom on day one knowing how to dependably assess the achievement of his or her students. We would have made sure every principal has enough assessment literacy to supervise this facet of a teacher’s work. Have we done either of these things? We have not. In the future, our assessment systems must arise from a universal foundation of assessment literacy throughout the fabric of American education.

**Reason 4: Our Communication of Assessment Results Has Rarely Been Truly Effective.**

Although the general public has chosen not to question how well test scores and grades convey information about student achievement, teachers have always struggled with the fact that psychometrically tricky test scores are difficult to interpret, let alone act on, and that we have no universally agreed-upon meaning for letter grades or how to determine them.

The test score version of this communication problem has recently been manifested in the reporting of the results of federally mandated multistate standardized tests developed by a consortium of state departments of education over six years and at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars. The meaning and instructional relevance of the scores reported remain painfully unclear to their recipients. As we look to the future, our assessments and our communication of assessment results must detail the specific learning targets mastered to date, pointing the way to what must come next in each student’s learning.

**Reason 5: Until Recently, We Have Not Wanted All Students to Succeed.**

Given education’s historic mission of sorting students, assessment’s traditional role, as we have established, has been to provide the evidence needed to justify this differentiation. The more spread assessment evidence could generate among students, the more dependable would be their rank order at graduation. In effect, over the decades we actually aspired to use assessment to maximize achievement gaps! We created an artificial scarcity of success and made students compete for it, promising winners and losers from the outset.
Teachers motivated students using a reward- and punishment-driven behavior management system. But understand that, in effect, some students were supposed to give up in hopelessness so as to occupy low ranks; it was simply how the system was designed to work. And we accepted it, even though it did harm to many students.

Happily, the new supplementary mission of education—that of promoting universal mastery of lifelong learner proficiencies—means we must redefine the relationships among assessment, student motivation, and student success in ways that sustain a universal belief within all students that “academic success is within my reach if I keep striving for it.” While it is unrealistic to hope that all students will attain the same ultimate level of overall academic achievement, it must be our new mission to help all students acquire the lifelong learning tools needed to reach their potential. That requires universal motivation to strive for success. We can no longer have any students giving up in hopelessness. We have at our disposal all of the tools and tactics needed to create for our students, ourselves, and our society an inspiring assessment system.

A ROADMAP FOR OUR JOURNEY TO PERFECTION

In this book, I provide detail on the origin and dimensions of our critically important new school mission (Chapter 2), analyze the key components of the perfect assessment system capable of leading to the fulfillment of this new mission (Chapter 3), and dissect each of this system’s active ingredients in specific and very practical terms:

- **Assessment purpose**—how to clarify why we assess in truly comprehensive terms (Chapter 4).
- **Learning targets to be assessed**—how to make sure we always know what to assess (Chapter 5).
- **Our definition of assessment quality**—how to do a good job of assessing every time (Chapter 6).
- **Communication of assessment results**—how to share information in ways that serve diverse purposes (Chapter 7).
• Linking assessment to truly productive universal student motivation (Chapter 8).

Each chapter adds nuance to an understanding of the essential conditions that must be put in place in our schools and classrooms to promote student well-being through excellence in assessment.

With this vision established and the way forward mapped, I summarize the benefits of completing this transformation (Chapter 9), highlighting the good things we can expect for students, their teachers, their supervising school leaders, policymakers, and our parents and communities. In fact, there are no losers if we navigate this passage successfully—everyone wins! There are no arguments against making this journey... except, of course, a collective unwillingness to take the risks and make the investments needed to rebuild our assessment infrastructure from scratch. There is no question about how to get there. The only remaining issue is whether we have the will to pay the toll required to make the crossing.

In that regard, this book ends with a summary of the investments we must make. By far, the greatest will be establishing throughout American education that long-missing foundation of assessment literacy—an understanding of the basic principles of sound assessment practice. All who have a stake in the quality of our schools must become assessment literate to a certain degree, including students, teachers, school leaders, policymakers at all levels, and parents and the greater school community. We can no longer remain a nation literally obsessed with raising test scores that understands so little about where these scores come from, what they mean, and what to do with or about them.

We can decide as a society not to make this journey and to cling tenaciously to the dogma of our tired testing traditions. But if that is our choice, we must stop claiming to care about universal student mastery of lifelong learner proficiencies, preparing all students for college and workplace training, achieving educational equity and narrowing achievement gaps, reducing dropout rates, and systematically evaluating school and educator performance in terms of student achievement. None of these crucial social priorities
can be achieved given our current assessment culture and the unhealthy educational environment in which assessment is being used. The time has come to stop struggling to make old thinking fit new needs and to move on as quickly as possible to our new assessment future.

In that future, with our perfect assessment system in place, we will gain access to

- Valuable assessment results for all instructional decision makers in all contexts.
- Emphasis on assessment to support learning for each individual student working in collaboration with his or her teacher.
- Clarity of learning targets and agreement on target priorities across contexts, classrooms, schools, districts, and states.
- Continuous and immediate evidence of what comes next in each student’s learning.
- Comparable results across contexts and over time.
- Access to the full range of assessment methods in order to reflect even the most complex learning targets.
- Flexible test administration versus universally standardized testing conditions.
- Results that always are easy to interpret and understand versus technical test scores.
- Excellence in communication of results both in formative and summative assessment situations.
- Immediate communication of results versus waiting weeks or months for test scores.
- All students motivated by the belief that academic success is within reach for them if they keep striving for it.

The only way to attain these benefits is to wipe the slate clean and build a completely new assessment infrastructure. A blueprint for doing so follows.
REFERENCES


Rick Stiggins is the founder and retired president of the Assessment Training Institute (ATI), Portland, Oregon, a professional development company created and designed to provide teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and communities with the assessment literacy they need to face the assessment challenges that pervade American education today. ATI is now owned by Pearson Education.

Prior to launching ATI in 1992, Stiggins served on the College of Education faculties of Michigan State University, the University of Minnesota, and Lewis and Clark College, Portland. He was director of test development at ACT in Iowa City, directed performance assessment and classroom assessment research and development programs at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, and has been a visiting scholar at Stanford University and the University of Southern Maine.

After conducting a decade of in-school research on the state and status of classroom assessment in U.S. schools, Stiggins authored a leading and award-winning introductory textbook for teachers on classroom assessment, An Introduction to Classroom Assessment FOR Student Learning, now in its 7th edition with Pearson Education. He has created numerous other print, video, and online preservice and inservice training programs used by teachers,
school leaders, and policymakers to improve assessment practice, and has published books, chapters, articles, and conference papers on classroom assessment research, development, and training.

Stiggins and his ATI team have helped hundreds of thousands of teachers and school leaders across the country and around the world learn to gather accurate evidence of student achievement and use the assessment process and its results to support, not merely to grade, student learning. The most unique aspect of their work is their practical development of the concept of “assessment FOR learning,” a classroom practice that involves students in the self-assessment process while they are learning so they can have the confidence that success is within reach if they continue to strive for it.

Stiggins is a native of Canandaigua, New York, and a graduate of the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, where he majored in psychology. He also holds a master’s degree in industrial psychology from Springfield (Mass.) College and a PhD in educational measurement from Michigan State University.

Details of Stiggins’s work are available through his website, rickstiggins.com. He can be reached at rickstiggins@gmail.com.
Related ASCD Resources: Assessment

At the time of publication, the following ASCD resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses). For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of Educational Leadership at www.ascd.org/el.

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Exchange ideas and connect with other educators interested in assessment, grading, and assessment FOR learning at the social networking site ASCD EDge® at http://ascededge.ascd.org.

Print Products
Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom: A Guide for Instructional Leaders by Connie M. Moss and Susan M. Brookhart (#109031)
Charting a Course to Standards-Based Grading: What to Stop, What to Start, and Why It Matters by Tim Westerberg (#117010)
Grading Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn by Myron Dueck (#114003)
How Teachers Can Turn Data into Action by Daniel R. Venables (#114007)
How to Make Decisions with Different Kinds of Student Assessment Data by Susan M. Brookhart (#116003)
Instruction That Measures Up: Successful Teaching in the Age of Accountability by W. James Popham (#108048)
Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading (Quick Reference Guide—25 pack) by Susan M. Brookhart (#QRG117045P)
Teaching Students to Self-Assess: How do I help students reflect and grow as learners? (ASCD Arias) by Starr Sackstein (#SF116025)
Using Data to Focus Instructional Improvement by Cheryl James-Ward, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp (#113003)

Video
The Power of Formative Assessment to Advance Learning (3 DVD Set and User Guide) (#608066)

For more information: send e-mail to member@ascd.org; call 1-800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600, press 2; send a fax to 703-575-5400; or write to Information Services, ASCD, 1703 N. Beauregard St., Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA.