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insights extra

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KASC posed the following questions to **Thomas R. Guskey**, an education professor at the University of Kentucky and author of "Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning."

> **How do you advise educators to look at assessment and how it can be used to bring students to proficiency?**

Typically, educators put too much emphasis on large-scale state assessments and not enough on classroom assessments. All assessments are designed for a specific purpose. Large-scale state assessments are designed primarily to rank-order schools and students for the purposes of accountability – and some do that fairly well. But assessments designed for ranking are generally not good instruments for providing teachers with information on how to improve their instruction or how to modify their approach to individual students for several reasons. First, they are administered at the end of the school year when instructional activities in most classrooms are all but completed. Second, teachers don't receive the results until two or three months later, and by that time their students have generally moved on to other teachers. And third, the results teachers receive usually lack the level of detail needed to target specific improvements.

The assessments best suited to guide improvements in student learning are the quizzes, tests, writing assignments, and other assessments teachers administer on a regular basis in their classrooms. The results from these assessments are immediate, relevant, and easy to analyze at the individual student level. But for teachers to use classroom assessments for the purpose of making improvements, they need to see their assessments as an integral part of the instructional process. Classroom assessments help teachers identify what was taught well and what areas need refinement or revision. As such, they provide teachers with specific guidance in their efforts to improve the quality of their teaching and help more of their students reach proficiency.

> **What do new technology or advancements in assessment offer now, in terms of staying aware of what students can do and how they are progressing?**

Gathering vital information on student learning progress doesn't require high levels of technology or sophisticated statistical analysis of assessment results. All that teachers need to do is to construct a simple tally of how many students missed each item on the assessment or failed to meet each criterion used in evaluating students' performance. Once the tally is constructed, special attention should be paid to those items or criteria missed by large numbers of students in the class. These identify the trouble spots.

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The first thing to consider in reviewing these results is the quality of the item or criterion itself. In other words, the teacher must determine if the problem rests with the assessment. Perhaps the question is ambiguously worded. Perhaps the criterion is unclear. Perhaps students misinterpreted what the teacher wanted. Whatever the case, teachers must look carefully at these items or criteria to determine if they adequately address the knowledge, understanding, or skill they were intended to measure.

If no obvious problems are found with the item or criterion, then teachers must be willing to turn attention to their teaching. If half the students in a class miss a clear and concise question or criterion related to a concept that was taught, then obviously that concept or criterion wasn't taught very well. Whatever strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn't work. When half the students in the class answer a question incorrectly or fail to meet a particular criterion, it's not a student learning problem – it's a teaching problem.

Analyzing assessment results in this way means setting aside some powerful ego issues. Many teachers' initial response to items or criteria missed by the majority of students is, "I taught them. They just didn't learn it!" But on further reflection most recognize that effectiveness in teaching is not defined by what they do as teachers. Rather, it is defined by what their students are able to do. If few students learned what was taught, could we really say that the teaching was effective? Can effective teaching take place in the absence of learning? Certainly not.

Some argue that such a perspective puts too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on the students. Occasionally teachers respond, "Don't students' have significant responsibilities in this process? Shouldn't students be expected to display initiative and personal accountability? And besides, if they don't get it, that's their fault, not mine. I'm here to teach and they're here to learn."

Indeed, responsibility for learning is shared. Even with valiant teaching effort, we cannot guarantee that all students will learn everything excellently. In fact, only rarely do teachers find items or assessment criteria that every student answers correctly. Plus there are always those few students who don't care enough or who are unwilling to put forth the necessary effort. But these students tend to be the exception, not the rule. If a teacher is reaching less than half of the students in the class, the problem isn't the students'; it's the teacher's. And it's this kind of evidence that teachers most need to help target their instructional improvement efforts.

> How should councils see their role in analyzing and using performance data to reach proficiency goals?

Councils, in collaboration with school leaders, both administrators and teacher leaders, need to do three important things. First, they must focus professional development efforts on helping teachers improve the quality of their classroom assessments. Valid evidence is absolutely necessary to guide improvement efforts, and few teachers have sufficient training in the development of effective classroom assessments to gather that valid evidence. Second, as part of that same professional development, they must help teachers align their classroom assessments to the knowledge and skills students are required to demonstrate on large-scale state assessments of proficiency. And third, they must work with district leaders to help school personnel schedule time for collaborative planning, when teachers and school leaders can come together to analyze classroom assessments results and plan specific remediation strategies for students who are experiencing learning difficulties.

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