

Classroom Assessment and School Improvement

The Issue

High-stakes assessments in today's educational environment receive major attention from the media and policy makers, including government officials. Far less attention is given to classroom assessments, which occupy a far greater percentage of the time in which students are formally tested and have a much greater impact on student learning.

The Research

A meta-analysis of research related to classroom assessment and school reform indicates that classroom assessment can have a major impact on school improvement efforts.

- School improvement plans that give attention to better classroom assessments result in substantial learning gains as measured by standardized test results.
- Average improvement ranges from 2-3 grade equivalents at the primary level to 3-5 grade equivalents at the middle school.
- The impact of improved classroom assessment is greater than that of most educational interventions.
- Improved classroom assessments help low-achieving students more than students who perform at a higher level.

Specific information related to ineffective assessment practices includes the following:

- Studies show that, while tests are generally scored conscientiously, little guidance is provided as to how students can make their work better.
- Classroom tests frequently emphasize rote learning, even when teachers say they want to emphasize reasoning and understanding.
- Tests are generally developed independently by individual teachers, with little sharing or review of test content to see that each test measures what it was intended to measure.
- Primary teachers tend to emphasize quantity and presentation of work with less attention to quality.
- Assessment results often have a negative impact on student learning by causing some students to believe they cannot learn.
- Collection of scores for grading purposes is often given higher priority than determining students' learning needs.

Practical Implications

The following are classroom assessment practices that have been used to increase student learning:

- Students have a clear picture of the achievement target and where they stand in relation to that target.
- Effective assessment involves students in evaluating their progress in reaching established goals.
- Assessment takes many forms and is ongoing through homework, seatwork, and classroom discussions, as well as formal tests.
- Teachers provide positive, specific feedback as to how students can improve their performance.
- Teachers collaborate in producing assessments and reviewing the results. This strengthens assessment practices while easing the work load and alleviating time constraints faced by all teachers.

Questions to Consider

- Do my assessments truly measure the major learning objectives I have established for students?
- What kind of specific feedback can I give my students that will help them raise their performance to higher levels as a result of assessment?
- How can we as a faculty find time to collaborate on assessment practices?

References

- Black, P. & Williams, D, "Inside the Black Box", *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 1998, pp. 139-145.
- Stiggins, R., "Assessment, Student Confidence, and School Success," a document used in training sessions sponsored by the Assessment Training Institute, Portland, Oregon, 1999.