

First Grade News

January 22, 2008

Student Assessment

It is almost impossible to pick up an educational journal today without finding some kind of article or discussion about assessment.

While it was not too long ago that assessment was primarily spoken of in negative terms, as in the context of standardized tests and meeting state standards, more and more ongoing assessment is being seen by educators as the **key to promoting learning and student progress**.

So what is different in our world to make many educators change their opinion of assessment and how has assessment itself changed?

Changes in how we view understanding: There was a time in education when we thought of understanding of a concept in the same way we thought of switching on a light. The light was either on or off. A student understood how to read or he didn't. We now know that understanding is something that builds over time as a result of experiences connected to the student's current level of understanding. So in reading, the student needs to hear sounds, then know letters, then learn the sound-symbol relationships, then know how to blend letter sounds into words, then connect the meaning of the words individually and in context with others, and then understand how to use the content of the material he has read in different situations. Rarely, do the development of these levels of understanding occur at one time. Nor are students usually able to skip levels of understanding such as jumping from hearing sounds to comprehending texts. Students usually need to be exposed to the material on multiple occasions at increasingly deepening levels of difficulty in a sequential manner in order to build understanding.

Changes to personalized instruction: It is now known that students make the greatest progress when the material is accessible, that is just beyond the student's current level of understanding. If the material is too difficult the student will not be able to engage in meaningful ways with the concepts and skills in order to develop understanding and he/she often becomes frustrated with the learning process. And, if the material is too easy there is not the necessary exposure to new concepts and skills to encourage further progress and the student often becomes disinterested in furthering understanding. Teachers personalize instruction to be at the student's just right level in order to maximize the student's progress. In order to personalize teachers must continuously assess.

Changes in how assessment is used: Part of the transformation in assessment's image seems to be due to a change in understanding of how the assessment results will be used. Students learn to value assessment when it is understood that assessment will provide him/her with concrete feedback on an ongoing basis. The feedback is valuable to the student in that it specifically informs the student of how to continually improve understanding of concepts and skills. The assessment is valuable to the teacher in that it provides information about how to proceed with subsequent teaching and learning. How different this feels than only a final test score or grade.

Changes to educating students for an unknown future: Teachers in the 21st century classroom are charged with developing students who can use concepts and skills flexibly in order that they may problem solve the unknown and unfamiliar events of the future. These classrooms value higher level thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, applying, and researching over memorizing of facts and algorithms.

Changes in how assessment looks: While assessment tools were once primarily viewed as paper and pencil tests, assessment tools are now seen as any type of student performance (any time a student does something that demonstrates understanding.) An example of this new type of assessment that is used in first grade and throughout lower school is called **Academic Choice**.

Academic Choice might be used before, during, or at the close of a unit to assess student understanding. A student would be asked to show her/his understanding of a specific concept or skill and could be given a choice of how they will show their understanding and/or what they will show. For instance, the objective of an academic choice might be for students to show their understanding of the concept of addition. The choices for "how" they show their understanding might be what medium they will use such as unifix cubes, a written explanation, or an oral report. The "what" choice in this example might be what numbers the students will use. Another example of academic choice might have the students showing their understanding of how wind is created. In this instance there would probably not be a "what choice" but the student might have a "how" choice of building a model, drawing a diagram, writing a report, or being a weatherperson giving a live TV report. **Academic Choice encourages students to use strengths and talents to show their understanding and progress.**

Pictures of students doing academic choice.

Changes in who does the assessing: Perhaps the most significant change in the process of assessing is who does the assessment. While assessment was once only the responsibility of the teacher, it is now also the responsibility of the student himself, peers, parents, and outside experts. Self-assessment often occurs in the form of reflection and it might include comparing of a performance to a rubric, or a reflection question. Peers, parent, and outside experts (such as professionals in a discipline) also act as coaches when given the appropriate tools. The role of all players involved in the assessment process is to guide, suggest and encourage rather than to discourage.

Giving Feedback

How feedback is given can be just as important as the feedback itself. A process we have found helpful is shown below.

1. **Clarify**--ask questions to be sure you understand your child's idea). (E.g., "Did you mean...? I'm not sure but I think you mean...).
2. **Value**--what do you see that is particularly impressive, innovative, or strong?
3. **Offer Concerns**--Do you detect some potential problems or challenges? Do you disagree with some part?
4. **Suggest**--Do you have suggestions to address the concerns you shared earlier?

The Ladder of Feedback

Upcoming Events

- January 28: 100th day of school
Scholastic Book Fair
Book Party at 5:00
- Thursday, January 31: 11:30 dismissal for
Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Friday, February 1: Parent-Teacher Conferences, no
school for students
- March 12: Written progress reports sent home
- February 14: Valentine's Day Party, 12:30-1:30 in
the classroom

