Critical Issue: Reporting Assessment Results

ISSUE: The ultimate success of the school improvement process is measured by advances in student knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes. Progress in these areas often is gauged by student assessment programs managed by state agencies or school districts. After the schools receive the assessment results, educators need to carry out specific activities in order to use the information effectively. (See the critical issue "Using Assessment in School Improvement Planning.") One important task is reporting the assessment results to interested individuals and groups so that their needs for information are met and they have a clear understanding of the assessment. When properly presented, assessment reports can help build support for schools and for initiatives that educators wish to carry out. But if assessment results are poorly reported, they can be disregarded or interpreted incorrectly, adversely affecting students, educators, and others in the school community.

OVERVIEW: Students, parents, and community members often misinterpret assessment data because they do not view the information in the proper context. They may fail to consider the many variables involved in the education process, such as students' diverse backgrounds and motivation levels. All children do not come to school equally prepared to learn. In addition, low-performing children are more likely to move frequently, so schools may have little opportunity to intervene with these students before assessment takes place.

Too often, assessment contributes to a competitive atmosphere among schools, districts, and states. When assessment data for a school shows a low rating, the public has a tendency to blame the school environment.

Ed Roeber, Director of Assessment for the Council of Chief State School Officers in Washington, DC, discusses how erroneous conclusions often are drawn when the results of assessment tests are misinterpreted. [Audio file, 180k] Excerpted from the audiotape Policy Talks, audiotape #2, Reaching for New Goals and Standards: The Role of Testing in Educational Reform Policy (NCREL, 1994). A text version is available.

The real goal of reporting assessment results to the students, parents, school, and the public is to help children learn. Yet this message is rarely reported or conveyed when schools release assessment results. The reason for this omission might be that some educators and policymakers are not fully aware of the different purposes for assessment. They may not know how to convey those purposes, as well as assessment results, to various audiences.


Problems in the reporting of results also may arise if the media oversimplifies this complex topic. Reporters sometimes are more concerned with finding a story than with reporting the complete results. Educators must remember to deliver the assessment results in a manner that puts the information in the proper educational perspective.

Despite the current attention given to student assessment, relatively little has been written on the use and reporting of assessment results. Even less research exists on the effectiveness of alternative strategies for using and reporting student assessment results. Yet public reporting of large-scale assessment results generates some of the largest complaints about student assessment.

John Davis, an English teacher at Columbia Middle School, describes the frustration that can arise when educators try to report information through the political and media arenas. [Audio file, 279k] Excerpted from the audiotape series Policy Talks, audiotape #1, Through the Eyes of Professionals (NCREL, 1994). A text version is available.

http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assessment/as600.htm
GOALS: Accurate and useful reporting of assessment results enables teachers, students, parents, and the public to understand why various assessment instruments are being applied and how the results will be used as part of the school improvement process. In order to meet this goal, educators involved in reporting assessment results should:

- Determine the specific goals of the reporting activities at the outset of the process.
- Select reporting strategies that are consistent with these goals and that effectively relay the desired information.
- Communicate student assessment results in a clear and accurate manner to students, parents, and the public.
- Report results at a level of understanding appropriate for the group or individual receiving the report.

ACTION OPTIONS: When preparing to write assessment reports, educators should:

- Determine how individual, group, and school results of various tests will help the school to improve instruction and learning. (See the critical issue "Integrating Assessment and Instruction in Ways That Support Learning.")
- Determine the audience for the reporting activity. The audience may include students, parents, the school board, or the public (Roeber, Donovan, and Cole, 1980).
- Be clear about why assessment results should be reported to these audiences. A clear statement of rationale is important (Roeber et al., 1980).
- Be equally clear about what information is to be communicated, for what purposes, and using which reporting techniques. Remember that multiple strategies are likely to be more effective (Roeber et al., 1980).

Educators have several options when preparing reports:

- Reports can be provided in person, in writing, or in both forms.
- Reports can be primarily text-based, graphical, or both.
- Reports can be lengthy and elaborate, or brief and straightforward.

One good reference for information on reporting assessment results is Pencils Down! A Guide for Using and Reporting Test Results, by Gucwa and Mastie (1989). This publication from the Michigan Department of Education presents descriptions of different procedures for reporting assessment results and includes a sample press release.

The following four sections describe methods that can be used when reporting assessment results to students, parents, the school board, and the public.

**Reporting Results to Students:** A two-step process is recommended for reporting assessment results to students. The first step is a briefing provided to the entire group of students who received individual results. The second step is individual follow-up meetings with students. These meetings should focus on how the teacher(s) will be addressing the individual needs of students.

**Reporting Results to Parents:** Parents want to know how their children are performing in school, so assessment information collected by schools is of great interest to them. Parents also want to know how the entire student body is performing in comparison with other schools. Reporting results to parents can satisfy both of these needs. Keep in mind that parents want to know how the school scored overall, even if their own children were not assessed.

The building administrator and teachers should be involved in carrying out both types of reporting activities. This collaboration helps build active partnerships between teachers and parents focused on the learning of children.

Four strategies are suggested for reporting results to parents. They are: (1) individual parent/teacher conferences, (2) an individual written report sent home, (3) parent group meetings, and (4) parent newsletter articles.

Although in-person meetings are generally more personal and effective, they are not always possible. Written reports...
may provide a more accessible form of communication between teachers and parents. In all types of reports, the information should include how well an individual student did on the assessment and what steps the educator will take to make improvements in instruction so that the student will learn what is needed. Written reports also should include information concerning how parents can actively participate in a plan of action to address the instructional needs of their child.

Vivian Lyte, a school administrator, talks about the need for having school or district staff members who can provide parents with information concerning the assessment tests that students are given. [Audio file, 189k] Excerpted from the videotape The ABCs of School Testing (The Joint Committee on Testing Practices, 1993). A text version is available.

Reporting Results to the School Board: The school board is the legal policymaking entity at the district level. As such, it deserves to receive reports on the results of assessment. A three-part reporting strategy is recommended for reporting to the school board.

The first report provides background information about the assessment effort itself. It explains what was assessed, what type of assessments were used, why they were used, and how the results will be applied and reported. This report might best be given when the assessment information is being collected, but before assessment results become available. Such timing encourages the school board members to focus on the message of the assessment rather than the numbers.

The second report contains the results of the assessment at the school and district levels. It should answer typical questions raised by policymakers.

The third report follows up on the status of efforts to improve instruction at the school and the effectiveness of these changes. This report, though optional, goes a long way in conveying to the school board that the real purpose of student assessment is to help improve teaching and learning, not to serve as a scorecard on the quality of the school.

Reporting Results to the Public: Many educators are frustrated that communities receive most reports of assessment results through the news media. The public seems to know little else about schools other than test results. As a consequence, school districts may be leery about reporting assessment results or being candid with the public regarding the level of student performance.

Grant Wiggins, Director of Educational Research and Development for CLASS (Consultants for Learning, Assessment and School Structure) in Rochester, NY, talks about why it is beneficial for community members to be educated about and aware of school assessment activities. [Audio file, 342k] Excerpted from the video series Restructuring to Promote Learning in America’s Schools, videoconference #4, Multidimensional Assessment: Strategies for the Classroom (NCREL, 1990). A text version is available.

Several steps are involved in successful public reporting of the assessment results. First, educators must decide what audience is going to be addressed. The "public" consists of many different groups of people with varying levels of prior knowledge and information needs. Second, purposes and goals for reporting must be resolved. Third, procedures for reporting the results need to be determined. Remember, the news media is only one way that the public can learn about schools.

There are three types of reports that can be used to communicate test results to communities. These reports are similar in form and content to the reports given to the school board.

IMPLEMENTATION PITFALLS: The largest pitfall is reporting assessment results in an unclear manner. If the information is overly complex or poorly written, it may be misunderstood or misused by the audience. To eliminate this pitfall, reports should be reviewed by various school staff members to ensure clarity.

A sample press release from Pencils Down! shows how to write a clear and informative report of assessment results. A press release should contain information describing what grades were tested, when the tests were administered, and how the students scored as compared to students attending other schools in the state. The press release also should contain the name and phone number of a school official who can be contacted for further information.

http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assessment/as600.htm
The effectiveness of the entire reporting process will be greatly hindered if the school or district makes no effective use of the assessment information. If teachers, administrators, and parents do not learn from and act upon the information provided by the assessments, the entire process will be of little or no benefit to the children. (Activities related to implementing changes based upon assessment results are described in the critical issue "Using Assessment in School Improvement Planning.") Remember, the ultimate goal of assessment is to better educate children.

**DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW:** There are differences in opinion about how much assessment information to report, as well as whether or not some types of assessment information should be publicly reported. Some people assume that if a public agency invests tax dollars in carrying out assessment activities, then the students, their parents, the local school board, and the public deserve to know how students did and what actions will be taken as a result.

Other individuals believe that assessment results should be shared with a much more limited audience.

Marjorie Mastie, a school testing specialist at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District in Ann Arbor, Michigan, describes the federal law that prohibits the public release of any individual child’s test scores. [Audio file, 360k] Excerpted from *The ABCs of School Testing* (The Joint Committee on Testing Practices, 1993). A [text version](http://www.cse.ucla.edu) is available.

Some educators object to sharing assessment results because the information may be misunderstood and reported incorrectly by the news media or others.

**ILLUSTRATIVE CASES:**

Ann Arbor Public Schools, Ann Arbor, Michigan

[Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP)](http://www.cse.ucla.edu)

**CONTACTS:**

Assessment Training Institute  
50 S.W. Second Ave., Suite 300  
Portland, OR 97204-2636  
503-228-3060  
Contact: Rick Stiggins

The Center on Learning, Assessment, and School Structure (CLASS)  
648 The Great Road  
Princeton, NJ 08540  
609-252-1211; fax 609-252-1268  
Contact: Grant Wiggins  
E-mail: classnj@aol.com

Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST)  
UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies  
405 Hilgard Ave., 1320 Moore Hall  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1522  
310-206-1532; fax 310-825-3883  
Contact: Joan Herman (joan2cse.ucla.edu)  
WWW: [http://www.cse.ucla.edu](http://www.cse.ucla.edu)

http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as600.htm
Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
One Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20001-1431
202-408-5505; fax 202-408-8072
Contact: Ed Roeber (edroeber@aol.com)
or Ramsay Selden (RamsayS@mail.ccsso.org)

Laboratory Network Project
North Central Regional Educational Laboratory
1120 Diehl Road, Suite 200
Naperville, IL 605631-1486
(630) 649-6500, E-mail: info@ncrel.org

Laboratory Network Project
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main St., Suite 500
Portland, OR 97204
503-275-9500; fax 503-275-9489
Contact: Judy Arter (areterj@nwrel.org)
WWW: http://www.nwrel.org/

Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP)
Michigan Department of Education
608 W. Allegan
Lansing, MI 48909
Phone: 517-373-8393
Fax: 517-335-1186
Contact: Peggy Dutcher, Assessment Consultant (pdutcher@ed.mde.state.mi.us)

Washtenaw Intermediate School District
1819 S. Wagner Road
P.O. Box 1406
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1406
313-994-8100
Contact: Marge Mastie (ext. 1121)
WWW: http://www.mde.state.mi.us/

References

This Critical Issue summary was researched and written by Edward D. Roeber, director of assessment, Council of Chief State School Officers.

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