Teaching Comes First:
How School District Leaders Can Support Teachers, Save Time, and Serve Students with a New Vision for Assessment
Teachers deserve assessments that provide them with information they can use to help their students excel, that illuminate what grade-level content looks like, and that foster a healthy culture.
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In 2017 district leaders in Assumption Parish Schools, Louisiana were frustrated by their assessments. After investing in high-quality curriculum materials and implementing new learning standards, they had developed common end-of-unit assessments. They thought that the tests reflected the new standards and curriculum. But students who did well on the schools’ unit tests weren’t always performing well on the state’s end-of-year tests.

Meanwhile, assessments were gobbling up precious instructional time. End-of-unit tests often took more than 90 minutes for students to complete, five or six times a year. Students also took multiple literacy screeners, diagnostics, curriculum-embedded assessments, and state tests.

For all the time spent on assessing students, the tests didn’t seem to be generating actionable knowledge to help focus instruction. What, district leaders asked, must they do to see instructional benefits from their assessment strategy?
When it comes to assessment, many educators feel that we have lost our way. In the majority of districts, testing seems to be taking up too much time and providing too little in return. Rather than valuable tools to improve teaching and learning, assessments are a jumbled, confusing mess of acronyms and stress.

The forces that have helped to create this feeling are among the biggest in education: a decades-long focus on accountability, the emergence of new technologies, and political battles over learning standards. In trying to navigate these forces and others, districts have enacted policies that many now recognize as bad practice. They try to make assessments serve purposes beyond those for which they were designed; they give redundant exams across grades and subjects; and they adopt assessments that aren’t well aligned to one another or to grade-level standards.

Despite widespread dissatisfaction, district leaders often feel powerless to change their situation. Fortunately, there are actions they can take.

In our work with districts like Assumption Parish across the country, we have seen leaders at all levels of a school system come together to develop an assessment strategy that helps refocus them on what matters most: great instruction.

By implementing an assessment strategy that puts teaching first, our partners have:

- Returned five days of instructional time to their teachers and students on average by reducing time spent on testing.
- Replaced weak curricular materials with higher-quality ones, resulting in as much as 47 more days of instruction grounded in high-quality content.
- Increased the share of assessments meeting rigorous quality criteria from 18% to 94%.
- Reclaimed assessment time for instructional rather than evaluative purposes, achieving a better balance of the two.
As our district partners went through this process, we saw an even more profound, if harder to quantify, outcome: They achieved a deeper, more consistent understanding of what it means for instruction to reflect grade-level expectations for all students.

This paper offers district leaders case studies, tools, and a description of the process that we have used to help our partners develop a coherent, instructionally focused assessment strategy. Although at first glance the process laid out in this paper seems straightforward, it is carefully designed to reflect lessons that have helped our partners succeed where many others have struggled. These lessons help our partners ensure that their revised assessment strategy puts teaching first.

Key Lesson 1

Make this work about instruction, not assessment.

Districts that developed a truly effective assessment strategy did not go into this process solely focused on cutting assessments. Instead, they began by building a vision of how they wanted their assessments to support good teaching and learning. In particular, they used this process to illuminate what it looks like for instruction to meet grade-level standards.

It may be counterintuitive, but the goal of reducing assessment volume did not drive the assessment strategy process. Rather, this goal became possible only after teams built a shared understanding of the connection between standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment — and a vision for the way they wanted assessments to serve educators and students in their district.

Key Lesson 2

Work collaboratively to take control of assessments.

District leaders can be quick to point the finger at state and federal mandates for causing their problems with assessment. School-based educators often point the finger at district leaders. In fact, we found problems at all levels. Of the 15 districts that we supported in one state, nine had problems with assessment volume that were driven by district choices, and 13 had problems that were caused by decisions made at the classroom level.

These problems arise from logical choices: One department doesn’t have its need met by another department’s test, so it develops a different one; classroom-level educators don’t understand the relevance of district-mandated tests, so they create their own. Without a clear, coherent strategy that is understood by district leaders, school leaders, and teachers alike, districts end up with confusing and inconsistent assessment systems.

To get the most out of this work, our partners brought together a group of educators that spanned functions within the central office and roles from district leader to classroom teacher. In order to ensure coherent decision-making, they gave the group space to build a shared understanding of assessment quality and purpose, and they charged the group with seeing the world through their colleagues’ eyes.
**Key Lesson 3**

**Take a granular view of assessment quality.**

Nearly all district and school leaders agree that high-quality ELA assessments should feature texts that are worth reading — authentic, complex texts that students might encounter in the real world. Yet when they look at the assessments they are using in their classrooms, they find texts written exclusively for testing purposes.

In the hectic, complex environment that so many district leaders face, it can be easy to make assessment decisions based on psychometric data, choreographed product demos, and very limited samples of assessment items.

When done right, the assessment strategy review process affords district and school leaders, as well as teachers, the opportunity to slow down and actually look together at a meaningful sample of the assessment content appearing in their classrooms. They carefully compare this content to a basic set of quality criteria and candidly discuss whether or not that content truly supports grade-level instruction.

**Key Lesson 4**

**Get clear about assessment purpose.**

Assessments have three purposes: predicting student performance, evaluating achievement or impact, and informing instruction. We do not believe there is a single best way to balance these three purposes. Rather, we’ve found that the districts that get the most out of their assessment strategy are clear-eyed and honest about the purpose for which each assessment is being used in practice.

For example, many districts support exit tickets or interim assessments for “instructional” purposes, yet they rely on the red/yellow/green reports from these assessments to rank students and make decisions about instructional interventions. As a result of this, both students and teachers feel evaluative pressure from assessments that are meant to be instructional in purpose, and district leaders make decisions based on the misapplication of data.

Only a frank discussion of the way assessments are actually being experienced in the classroom can ensure a strategy that uses each assessment for its appropriate purpose.

Assessments shape the way teachers and students spend time in their classrooms. They shape the expectations we have for our students. And they shape the adult culture in a school. Teachers deserve assessments that provide them with information they can use to help their students excel, that illuminate what grade-level content looks like, and that foster a healthy culture.

We hope the process laid out in this paper can help district leaders—including superintendents, assessment directors, and academic directors—put in place an assessment strategy that meets those needs.
Achievement Network (ANet) is a nonprofit dedicated to the premise that every child deserves an excellent education and the opportunities it provides. We help school and district leaders support great teaching—teaching grounded in standards, shaped by data, and based on great practices from educators across the country.

At the school level, we provide school leadership teams with coaching, data tools, and high-quality assessments that help them support high-quality instruction. Researchers from Harvard University found that, when the right basic conditions are in place, students in ANet’s partner schools achieve six additional months of learning over a two-year period compared to similar schools.

At the system level, we provide both short-term intensive strategy support and ongoing implementation support to district and CMO leaders.

This paper focuses on lessons from ANet’s intensive strategy support, in which we help school systems evaluate and strengthen their approach to assessment, instructional materials, and professional learning.
Revising Your Assessment Strategy

In our partnerships with school systems, we have found that the most effective approach to revising assessment strategy is to take a step back, look at the assessment system as a whole, and focus on supporting great teaching and learning. Rather than jumping straight to the decision-making stage, our process consists of three phases that lead the district to better long-term results.

In the first phase, leaders lay the groundwork for their efforts by building a common language and developing a shared vision.

Next, staff take a close look at the purposes and quality of current assessments. In the process, they deepen their understanding of the standards and determine whether assessments in their district reflect those standards and serve teachers’ instructional needs.

After completing these first two phases, district leaders can make informed decisions and implement changes that will have lasting effects. We discuss each of these phases in more detail in the following sections.
Laying the Groundwork

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1. Build your team.

To start, we recommend that districts convene a working group that includes district-level assessment and curriculum specialists, school leaders, and teachers or coaches. The working group builds team members’ assessment knowledge, audits current assessments, and comes together around a new vision for assessment and instruction.

The interdepartmental working group provides a valuable opportunity for collaboration and connections between people who usually find themselves in different silos. In many systems, staff on different central office teams — for example, in curriculum, data, or assessments — rarely have the chance to align decision-making around their ultimate shared goal: supporting excellent teaching and learning. In the end, the assessment strategy will be stronger and easier to implement if a diverse set of stakeholders, including senior leaders, engages in the process.

The working group should have one or two dedicated project leaders. District project leaders select working group members, shepherd the assessment strategy process during and between meetings, keep top leaders informed at key decision points, and craft implementation plans after the working group makes its recommendations.

The working group can accomplish its work, explained in detail below, in a fairly short period of time. In smaller ANet partner districts, the working group meetings usually take two to three intensive days of group time over the course of a few months. In larger districts, they might need to meet for four to five days over a similar period. Project leaders should plan to work more intensively on developing the strategy, over a longer period of time.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

Too many assessment decisions are made in silos, resulting in miscommunication and misalignment. Build a working group that represents many kinds of expertise in your district.

In many systems, staff on different central office teams — for example, in curriculum, data, or assessments — rarely have the chance to align decision-making around their ultimate shared goal: supporting excellent teaching and learning.
2. Get on the same page.

Before the working group can create and champion a new assessment strategy, members have to ensure that they are speaking the same language around assessments. We ask each member of the working group to share how they define terms like “interim” and “formative” assessment and to identify the purpose and frequency of each of the assessments they administer. In almost every instance, the team members find that they define key terms differently or have different purposes in mind for the same test. The survey responses below illustrate this misalignment.

In this example, the nine members of the district’s working group only agreed unanimously on how to classify two tests: They all agreed that their ACT-aligned internal tests are interim assessments and Smarter Balanced end-of-year tests are not. A subset of respondents described end-of-module tests and the STEP literacy assessment as interims, and at least one working group member would use that term to describe teacher-created tests, exit tickets, or the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP).

In actuality, the ACT practice tests, STEP, and MAP are all interim tests, and the classification for the curriculum-embedded tests would depend on how frequently they are given and the data they generate (see below for definition). Too often, district leaders make decisions about assessment strategy without realizing that they hold different assumptions about the same test, which can contribute to redundancy and mixed messages.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

“Formative” is probably the most commonly misused word in assessment. It’s important to get clear— are your district’s “formative” assessments truly informing teaching and learning, as they are currently being used in practice?

If district leaders are going to make coherent decisions about their assessment strategy, they must develop a shared vocabulary about two central concepts across the working group at the outset: frequency and purpose.

Sample Working Group Survey Responses (N=9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Type</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal ACT Practice Tests</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum End-of-Module Tests</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEP</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAP</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Created Tests</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit Tickets</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smarter Balanced</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which of the following assessments would be considered an interim assessment?
Another term we often hear is “formative” assessments. Some people use this term to cover anything besides an evaluative, annual assessment, which can be a source of confusion. We remind our partner districts that the word “formative” shares the same root as “inform.” Any truly formative assessment should inform the teaching and learning process by providing the teacher feedback about students’ strengths and gaps in a specific area. To most people, formative and instructional mean the same thing, but we find the term “instructional” more accurate and descriptive.
3. Set a new vision for assessment.

Once the working group is on the same page about the language they are using to describe assessments, they can look at their current assessment system with clear eyes and set a vision for what they want it to look like.

Like the step of aligning around terminology, this step is often overlooked in the daily pressure to make decisions and move on. But we find that building an assessment “vision” is well worth the time. The process requires district teams to focus on how they want assessments to support good teaching and learning—districts’ ultimate goal. That vision can then serve as a compass to guide tough choices, not only about what to keep and what to cut, but also how assessment data is used.

The benefits of articulating an assessment vision extend beyond testing. A strong assessment vision can also prompt district leaders to reflect on how assessment aligns with other teaching and learning choices, like their curriculum strategy. As district leaders deepen their understanding of assessments, they recognize that teachers are more effective in using a high-quality curriculum when their assessments provide substantive and accurate feedback on students’ understanding of the standards.

The examples on the facing page show how two of our partner districts articulated their vision for assessments. Each illustrates the connection between assessments and teaching and learning.

**The vision should commit to assessments that are:**

- **Meaningful:** Each assessment should serve a clearly defined and appropriate purpose.

- **Coherent:** Assessments as a whole should work together to paint a complete picture of students’ skills, knowledge, and understanding, with balance between types of assessments, and respect for students’ and teachers’ time.

- **High quality:** Each individual assessment should meet quality standards (discussed below).

**LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS**

_Districts cannot realize the full benefits of their work on assessment, instruction, and curricula unless they are addressed as part of a cohesive strategy_
Example assessment visions:

“In Humboldt County School District, we are committed to providing assessments that are high quality by design, produce meaningful data for all stakeholders, and serve as part of a coherent system of teaching and learning. Our goal is to improve instructional practice and increase student learning.” Humboldt County School District, Nevada

In Assumption Parish, we strive to leverage assessments as an instructional tool to increase the impact of teaching and learning and make instruction more equitable for all students. At the foundation of the teaching and learning cycle are assessments, which can be as short as an exit slip or as long as a benchmark, and should be connected to day-to-day instruction. In order for assessments to enable better teaching and learning, they should be purposeful, high quality, and aligned to grade-level expectations, and part of a coherent plan that empowers students and teachers.” Assumption Parish Schools, Louisiana
Revising Your Assessment Strategy

Reviewing Assessments

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4. Conduct an assessment inventory.

Once everyone in the working group is speaking the same language and shares a common vision, the next step is to figure out which tests students currently take, and why. The working group should collect examples of all the different assessments being used in their schools.

We encourage working groups to put everything on the table, including tests created at the district or school level. The inventory should include samples of teacher-created tests from a cross-section of grades and subjects. We also survey teachers and school leaders to get a sense of how much time they spend on testing and their understanding of the intended purpose of each assessment. This process helps elevate the perspectives across the district, from the classroom to the central office.

To accurately identify the purpose for which a test was designed, we look to data reports, technical specifications, and item design. For example, a predictive test should have data explicitly linking it to an end-of-year test, and might label students “on track” or “off track” of learning expectations. An evaluative test might include labels such as “proficient,” or “on grade level.” And an instructional assessment should provide more detailed information about students’ understanding of just one or two learning standards, so teachers could adjust their approach in the next class.

Having gathered a broad sample of current assessments, the working group takes a critical look at the purpose of each type of assessment in their portfolio, and examines whether their mix of tests aligns with their vision. As described earlier, districts are most successful in making meaningful changes when they take a critical look at how the assessments are being used in practice.

Common problems districts find when they take stock of assessments include:

- Many tests with evaluative purposes and very few tests that are only for teachers to use instructionally
- Out-of-date and/or redundant assessments that don’t support student learning or serve a clear strategic purpose
- Mislabeled assessments used for purposes that the test design doesn’t support
- Teachers, principals, and district leaders with very different beliefs about the purpose(s) of each assessment
If the assessment inventory uncovers out-of-date or redundant assessments, in which educators unintentionally administer multiple tests to the same students for the same purpose, these should be eliminated from the district’s portfolio right off the bat.

One district learning specialist told us, “I spend most of my time in schools, but even I was surprised to see how the number of hours students spent on assessments all added up.” In another district, teachers felt burdened by certain interim tests because they weren’t clear on why the district required those assessments. According to a principal, “Teachers gave the tests from a place of compliance, but they weren’t using the information.”

Although conventional wisdom holds that federal and state mandates are the cause of over-testing, a surprising amount of excess testing originates at the school level. That’s good news. It means that district leaders, school leaders, and teachers have more power to cut down the number of assessments and restore balance than they might think. As mentioned earlier, in our work with 15 school districts in Louisiana, we found that 13 had testing volume problems created by choices at the classroom level. After completing the assessment strategy review process, eight were able to cut down on these tests across all schools.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

Most tests in schools are not mandated by law and many tests come from teachers themselves—often as a logical response to an off-balance system. This reality means that when district leaders, school leaders, and teachers work collaboratively, they often find they have more agency over testing volume than they previously realized.
5. Put instructional purpose first.

A common—though usually unrecognized—source of testing frustration stems from a lack of truly instructional assessments. Often, districts layer evaluative purposes on top of instructionally designed tests. For example, we see leaders describe short-cycle tests in both instructional terms (“we use this quiz to help teachers determine which students are struggling with certain material and why”) and evaluative terms (“we ask teachers to input every student’s score, and track each classroom’s results using this dashboard”).

Layering evaluative purposes on instructional assessments can have unintended consequences for teaching and learning. If teachers and students know that the results of a test will be used to summarize and “grade” their performance, they will be less likely to use it for honest reflection, and more likely to “teach to the test.” Use of instructional assessments for evaluative purposes also undermines the culture of a school. If districts want assessments to genuinely support better instruction, it is critical that teachers trust that some assessments will only be used to inform instruction, not evaluation.

When a district’s assessment strategy is weighted heavily toward evaluative testing, teachers tend to supplement with assessments of their own in order to gain information that can be used for purely instructional purposes. Not only can this increase testing time, the quality of these DIY assessments varies widely if teachers have no guidance or support to create them.

Once the working group understands the value of ensuring that their strategy includes assessments with a purely instructional purpose, they can recommend measures to rebalance their assessments. Taking the time to make room for instruction is a game changer for districts struggling to clear a crowded assessment landscape.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS
A common realization among our partners is that, rather than being balanced across assessment purposes, their strategy has become over-weighted toward evaluative purposes. Using instructional tests for evaluative purposes has unintended negative consequences: decreased teacher trust, more teacher time spent on data entry, and unreliable aggregate data.

If teachers and students know that the results of a test will be used to summarize and “grade” their performance, they will be less likely to use it for honest reflection, and more likely to teach to the test.

The next step is to conduct a thorough quality review process grounded in learning standards. The working group looks at its assessments, question by question, and delves into how well each test measures college- and career-ready standards and demonstrates the appropriate level of instructional rigor.

Understanding quality requires working group members to consider the meaning and intention of each learning standard. By working collaboratively through the process, working group members deepen their collective understanding of the standards and how they relate to assessment and instruction.

Quality markers will look different depending on the purpose of the assessment. For example, predictive assessments tend to measure a wide array of standards, with less depth, whereas instructional assessments usually focus on a few standards in a more targeted way, directly addressing what the teacher has just covered. Working groups evaluate each assessment’s quality in the context of its intended purpose.

In the quality review process, there are a few key quality criteria we advise working group members to look for in ELA and math assessments, explained in the table below. ANet based these criteria on keystone quality metrics developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Louisiana Department of Education, and others, and adapted them for easy use for those without specialized assessment expertise. The relative weight of each criterion might shift depending on the purpose of a particular assessment, but each is an important reminder of the complexities of high-quality assessment design.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

Getting granular during the quality review process is a great opportunity to make sure working group members understand learning standards.

By working collaboratively through the process, working group members deepen their collective understanding of the standards and how they relate to assessment and instruction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATH</th>
<th>ELA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items elicit direct evidence of the degree to which a student can demonstrate the targeted standards. The set of items is consistent with the most critical content of the identified standard.</td>
<td>Items elicit direct evidence of the degree to which a student can independently demonstrate understanding of the text relative to the demands of the standard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rigor of items is tied to the language of the standard.</td>
<td>The assessment contains a variety of item types, including writing tasks in response to high-quality texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment contains a variety of item types purposefully selected to align to the standard.</td>
<td>Texts in assessments should be worth reading, including high-quality texts at an appropriate level of complexity for the grade level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment demonstrates authentic connections between content and practice standards.</td>
<td>Texts in assessments should balance genres, including literary and informational texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment focuses on grade-level standards and the majority of items should come from the major work of the grade.</td>
<td>Interim and short-cycle assessments should include purposefully linked passages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CCSSO, IMAP, LDOE, AET, EQUIP tool.
Although many district leaders feel they have a good working knowledge of what makes for a high-quality assessment, the key is taking the time to critically assess a sample of actual assessments from their classrooms. When working groups evaluate their assessments against college- and career-ready learning standards and quality criteria, they are often surprised to find that their assessments do not sufficiently measure what they want students to know and be able to do.

For example, in one district, instead of reading and analyzing rich, authentic texts from the real world in their ELA assessments, students were primarily tested using basic, below-grade-level texts that the district purchased from assessment vendors. In another district, questions in math tests only asked students to complete a procedure, rather than apply it or demonstrate understanding. In both cases, students were being asked to do work that reflected neither the expectations teachers had for their students nor the expectations students would need to meet on end-of-year state tests.

During these quality reviews, some new issues often come to light:

- **Some assessments in use lack the necessary rigor and depth**
  to reflect college- and career-ready standards (whether they are teacher-created, downloaded, or purchased).

- **Tests are longer than they need to be**
  to effectively measure the desired standards, with repetitive questions that take up student time without providing teachers new information they can use to help students.

- **The standard measured by a question is unmarked or unclear.**

- **Low-quality curricular materials yield low-quality assessments.** Interim and formative assessments might accurately represent what is being taught, but what is being taught is not aligned to grade level standards.
On the positive side, districts may also find high-quality pieces of their current system they didn’t know existed or are underutilized. For example, in several partner districts the working groups discovered that the district’s existing curriculum included high-quality embedded assessments. But teachers used them inconsistently. Once educators understand what makes these assessments useful and high quality, they can put the resources at their disposal to better use (and stop using lower-quality or redundant resources).

The quality review process is an opportunity to bring the strengths and weaknesses of each of the district’s current assessments to light and to talk in depth about what kinds of skills and knowledge students should be able to demonstrate throughout the course of the year. It is a window into how curricula and standards should translate into students’ skills and knowledge. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the different kinds of information various tests should provide in order to improve instruction and inform district decision-making.

Comparing assessment content to grade-level standards can result in a seismic shift in the quality of curriculum and assessment materials. For example, among our 15 district partners in Louisiana, our work resulted in an average change from 18 percent to 94 percent of instructional assessment content coming directly from sources the Louisiana Department of Education* rated as high quality.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS
Judge test quality for yourself—don’t just rely on vendors. Are ELA texts worth reading? Do math tasks bring concepts to life? Are all tasks aligned to the grade-level standards?

Comparing assessment content to grade-level standards can result in a seismic shift in the quality of curriculum and assessment materials.

* https://goo.gl/2nWxHL
Transform Your Assessment Approach

7. Decide what to cut, keep, or modify.

8. Create and implement an action plan.
7. Decide what to cut, keep, or modify.

In the first two phases of work, districts uncover the current state of their assessment system — the good, the bad, and the ugly — while simultaneously building capacity to recognize purpose and quality. Next, district leaders and working group members look toward the future and work collaboratively to decide on changes and create an action plan aligned to their vision.

Keeping in mind the shared vision and the goal of elevating instructional assessments, working groups identify gaps and redundancies in their current assessment inventory. Based on this analysis, they decide which assessments to keep, cut, add, or modify. Every test should have a defined purpose and meet the high-quality criteria outlined above — and be clearly linked to teaching and learning.

In many cases, “cutting” low-quality assessments really means providing guidance and training about how to use existing assessments and instructional materials. By enriching educators’ understanding of assessment quality, purpose, and connection to standards, district leaders can help reduce the creation of redundant assessments. They can also help educators get the most out of their curricular materials because they ensure that assessments and curriculum are setting the same expectations for students.

As a result of their new, shared understanding of assessment purpose and quality, district leaders can make substantial changes that set their schools on course toward high-quality, meaningful assessment. In addition to providing guidance and training to teachers and school leaders where needed, districts can set a new course by cutting redundant assessments. Some districts replace low-quality assessments or curriculum with higher-quality materials. Some clarify and streamline assessment purposes to ensure that assessments designed for instructional purposes are not being inappropriately used for evaluative purposes. These kinds of changes add up to a much more effective assessment system.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

“When you take this deep dive into truly looking at quality, purpose, and volume of your assessments, it’s not only about assessment and student achievement. It opens your eyes to instruction, planning, knowing why you’re assessing and what you’re trying to learn from the assessments.”

— Cindy Blanchard, teacher pipeline specialist, Assumption Parish Schools
8. Create and implement an action plan.

Decision-making and rollout processes will look different in every district, depending on goals, vision, capacity, and current state. Some districts decide to release optional guidance and phase in changes gradually. Others decide to make broader, faster overhauls in their assessment strategy.

Sometimes, the working group might decide to prioritize action related to curriculum and standards-based instruction before making assessment changes, so that the district builds foundational systems and structures for more effective teaching and learning. By working collaboratively, working groups can be intentional about where, when, and how to implement changes.

Even with wide variations in what districts decide to do, there are four key aspects of implementation that action plans should address.

Every action plan should address:

1. **Professional learning**: Educators will need extra support and training to put the new assessment vision to work in their classrooms. We find that this element of implementation takes the most careful planning and long-term effort to execute well but that, without it, the best-laid plans can fizzle.

2. **Communications**: District leaders, working group members, and school leaders should communicate changes early and often, and include meaningful opportunities for feedback, questions, and input from educators, families, and staff.

3. **Logistics and operations**: From calendars to technology to bell schedules, strong implementation should reflect a firm grasp on how school-building logistics will interact with assessment strategy changes. District leaders should also consider how to sequence or roll out changes appropriately.

4. **Progress monitoring**: A strong implementation plan should include progress checks at regular intervals and a commitment to making adjustments as needed. Learning does not end when the working groups conclude.

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**LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS**

You may encounter resistance to cutting or replacing outdated or redundant tests. Every test has a history, and someone in the district uses it, prefers it, or chose it. That is one reason why professional development and communications plans are so critical during assessment shifts.
Professional learning and communications are the two most important aspects of implementation planning. Many teachers have experienced years of frequent assessment changes and uncertainty in important areas, such as performance evaluation. Understandably, teachers might be wary of changes that seem to come from the top down, or arrive without explanation or clear intent.

A successful implementation plan will not only address what the changes are; it will explain why the working group came to these decisions and how changes will better support great teaching and learning.

When we work with districts to translate their assessment strategy decisions into action plans, we find that explicitly linking communication (like a guidance document) with professional learning opportunities is often a good way to make changes tangible for teachers. For example, if assessment guidance encourages teachers to use certain kinds of instructional assessments more often, a paired professional learning opportunity might focus on differentiating between high-quality and low-quality formative tasks.
Like a three-legged stool, high-quality assessment, curriculum, and instructional strategies work together to maximize student learning. In too many districts, however, the stool is off balance because we have lost sight of the instructional purpose of assessment. When our district partners follow the steps described above to center assessments on teaching and learning, they emerge with a strategy that supports curriculum, instruction, and, ultimately, student success.

The best way to illustrate the assessment strategy review process is to tell the stories of districts that have done it. The case studies below describe how three districts streamlined their assessments and re-prioritized instructional purposes in assessment. Change is rarely easy, especially in larger districts or those where assessments have become a source of frustration or conflict among educators. However, in all three of the districts profiled below, district teams were able to work collaboratively to forge a new assessment strategy designed to meaningfully support teaching and learning.
The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, California

Teachers and leaders can have more useful information with less testing by clarifying the line between instructional and evaluative assessments.
The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools is a nonprofit partner of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in Los Angeles, California, which manages and supports a network of 18 urban public schools serving 14,500 students. These include some of the most historically underserved schools in the district. Schools in the Partnership network have flexibility to differ from district mandates in several areas, including assessments.

Background

Within the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, assessments were a frequent source of frustration for educators. “Teachers feared or resented assessments, and saw them as totally detached from instruction,” said Karin Rinderknecht, director of school transformation for the Partnership.

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools is in a unique position within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The 18 public schools in the Partnership have a waiver that allows them to administer different assessments from the rest of the district (except for those required by state or federal law). The Partnership reached out to ANet because the network was not using this flexibility to its fullest potential to ensure that teachers and school leaders had the right information to guide instruction. The Partnership wanted to build a new mindset related to assessment while simultaneously streamlining tests and improving quality.
Clarifying each test’s purpose

At the beginning of the process, the working group found that they had different purposes in mind for the same assessment. For example, when asked about the purpose of interim assessments aligned to the Smarter Balanced annual tests, some grade bands used results only for evaluative purposes, while other grade bands used the same tests for instruction and evaluation, without a clear reason for the difference.

Redundancy was also an issue. The Partnership gave several different interim assessments that covered similar material. These tests had piled up unintentionally: Some were created internally while others came from outside sources. The Partnership had a “more is better” approach to assessments and data that wasn’t yielding the results they needed.

The working group realized that they had to sort through the pros and cons of each test they were giving, and cut down on interim assessments that weren’t serving a clear purpose for teachers or students.

Reclaiming instructional assessments

The Partnership provided common instructional, short-cycle assessments for some grades and subjects, which could have been a valuable resource for teachers, but they weren’t being well used. The working group discovered that teachers viewed these tests with suspicion because results were centrally aggregated and used for evaluative monitoring. In survey results, some school leaders saw these tests as predictive of state test results (which they weren’t), and many saw them as purely evaluative.

Leaders in the Partnership realized that they had other, more reliable sources of evaluative data, and opted to stop aggregating the results of these short-cycle assessments. As a result, teachers now have assessments that are only used to inform instruction.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

“Clearly defining the purpose of the assessments was eye-opening. We had gotten into the habit of saying to teachers, ‘Here’s the assessment, here’s when you need to administer it,’ without communicating why, and how we should use the results.”

– Randy Romero, principal, the Partnership for LA Schools
Focusing on purpose leads to leaner, higher-quality assessment strategy

Leaders within the Partnership central office, alongside school leaders, aligned on purposes for each assessment, and used that clarity to guide their decisions on streamlining assessments. New assessment guidance for teachers in the coming school years will explain the purpose of each assessment, and how teachers and school leaders should use the information it yields. The Partnership will cut down significantly on interim assessments, especially in elementary and middle school. They will also stop centrally monitoring instructional assessment results and provide teachers with guidance on where to find high-quality instructional resources.

Randy Romero, principal of a middle school within the Partnership, is looking forward to sharing some of the insights he had in the working group with his teachers. “One thing that will be important is showing all our cards to teachers, down to the question level. Some people will use these tools better if they know what goes on under the hood and why the tests are designed in a certain way.”

Romero has seen the biggest successes among teachers who have had a chance to collaborate on assessments and learn skills to develop or judge high-quality tests. Eventually, Romero would like to see his students approaching their own tests in the same way. “They should be aware of their own data, and see where they excel and where they need more work. This can put students in the driver’s seat of their own learning.”

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

Using all tests for some kind of central evaluation was eroding teacher trust, and creating misunderstandings about purpose.
Case Study 2

Assumption Parish, Louisiana

With teacher support, districts can take advantage of curriculum-embedded tests and cut down on redundant, lower-quality testing.
Assumption Parish Schools

Assumption is a small Louisiana district of 10 schools serving 3,500 students, about two-thirds of whom come from low-income households. Assumption Parish is a mostly agricultural area, whose largest town, Napoleonville, has fewer than 700 residents.

Background

Assumption Parish Schools had two problems to tackle. According to Cindy Blanchard, the district’s teacher pipeline specialist, the first problem was overall testing volume: “Teachers were overwhelmed with testing.” The second was consistency and quality in interim and short-cycle assessments. An earlier district-led effort to create common assessments resulted in tests that were too long, and didn’t seem to meet the needs of students and teachers. Kathi Aucoin, an assistant principal in the district, expressed the frustration of many educators: “If all we’re doing is testing, when are we teaching?”
Diagnosing issues with both purpose and quality

Assumption created a working group of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers and, with support from ANet, inventoried and evaluated existing district and school assessments. Teachers were an influential voice in the working group and pushed for high-quality assessments.

The group uncovered several quality and purpose issues that drove up testing time and reduced the effectiveness of the assessment system. First, the district required redundant and overlapping assessments in both math and reading, such as three literacy screeners administered multiple times per year. Second, teachers supplemented curriculum-embedded assessments and tasks with additional tests and quizzes that were sometimes lower quality, in part because they worried that the embedded tasks would be too difficult for students. Working group reviews uncovered questions that were far below grade level. As a result of these issues, students and teachers spent a lot of time on tests that weren’t measuring high-level skills, and weren’t giving an accurate picture of student progress.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

“It was enlightening to see that, when compared to the standards, our tests did not always have the rigor students needed, and there were too many questions. You don’t necessarily need a lot of items to test for mastery of a single skill.”

– Kathi Aucoin, assistant principal, Assumption Public Schools
Capitalizing on instructional strengths

A high-quality curriculum plan and free, high-quality interims put Assumption in a strong position to improve their assessments. At the state level, Louisiana has emphasized curriculum quality and created a suite of high-quality interim assessments aligned to their summative test. “Once the state rolled out [the interim tests], we could eliminate some of the benchmark tests that were old,” said Blanchard.

After the working group understood what high-quality materials should look like and the purpose that different types of tests served, Assumption realized that they had many high-quality instructional resources already embedded in their curricular materials. Teachers could use them as shorter-cycle checks for understanding of specific standards, and they could recognize how those results might be valuable.

Working with teachers to reduce redundancy and improve quality in testing

Teacher leadership in the working groups was one of Assumption’s most important assets. Teachers were among the strongest voices pushing for clarity and quality throughout the district assessment system, and encouraging the district to provide guidance that would reorient educators’ assessment mindsets toward teaching and learning.

With the support of participating teachers and school leaders, the Assumption working group created a vision for assessments in the district, identified areas for cuts and purpose clarifications at the district level, and crafted guidance for teachers regarding in-class assessments. The district reduced overall testing time by several days by eliminating some assessments and giving others less frequently.

Teachers still have flexibility to choose or create their own assessments, but they have greater clarity on what sources and tasks are high quality and why it is important and valuable to test to the rigor of the standards. Assessment guidance and follow-up professional development redirected teachers to higher-quality sources for test creation, and clarified the best ways to use the resources teachers already had.

The rollout of these changes is ongoing, but Rhea Blanchard, a teacher-leader, is optimistic about how these changes will support her classroom and her colleagues. “Teachers have to work smarter, not harder, and the new guidance will help us do that.”
Humboldt County, Nevada

Districts can use an assessment review as a window into their curriculum and instructional rigor.
Humboldt County School District

Humboldt County, Nevada is a very rural district serving approximately 3,500 students in 11 schools. The district spans an area of over 9,600 square miles, larger than the state of New Jersey. Of those students, 47 percent come from low-income households, and 12 percent are English language learners.

Background

Leaders in the rural Humboldt County School District were struggling to find coherence across their 11 schools — some of which are hours apart from one another, operating with a high level of autonomy. The central staff in the district is a lean team, but they knew that their district strategy needed to improve and better support student learning. “More than 50 percent of our students were in low-performing elementary schools,” explained Assistant Superintendent Dawn Hagness — and students who fell behind early rarely caught up to their peers.

Moreover, because curriculum wasn’t consistent across schools, students who transferred between schools within the district were often instructionally lost. Humboldt’s leaders asked ANet to help them build capacity around standards, data, and assessments in order to better support schools.
CASE STUDY 3

Humboldt County, Nevada

Identifying test time and test quality challenges

In a working group that included district leaders, school leaders, and school-based instructional coaches, Humboldt County discovered that students were spending more time testing than leaders realized. And, too often, the tests were low quality and out-of-date. For example, the working group looked at a fourth-grade math assessment and found questions on a second-grade level.

Teachers wanted trusted sources for instructional assessments, so they didn’t have to spend so much time finding or creating their own tests. More than 77 percent of teachers reported spending over three hours a week creating tests. “Teachers were working really hard, but the tests they were using were low rigor and low quality, so it didn’t help their instruction,” says Hagness.

Uncovering the connection between assessment quality and instruction

In some grades and subjects, the lack of a consistent, high-quality curriculum lay at the root of assessment challenges. High school math and middle school ELA each stood out for the wrong reasons: Instructional resources were out of sync with the standards, and there was no system-wide access to high-quality curriculum.

Additionally, in grades and subject areas where there was a strong curriculum available, teachers used resources inconsistently. As a result, “you had some teachers giving complex, rigorous work, and others not at all,” according to learning specialist Gail Janhunen.

The working group’s findings led them to realize that they could not fix the problem of over-testing without addressing the quality of curriculum across schools and subjects. In response, the district launched a curriculum adoption process to identify and purchase a better, shared curriculum in grades and subjects where one was lacking. They also recognized that the new curricular materials and assessment strategy could not be effective without a deliberate effort to build teachers’ ability to connect instruction to rigorous standards.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS

“Many assessments we’d been using were several grades below where they should be [in terms of rigor], which is part of the reason why we were not seeing the growth and the achievement we wanted for students.”

– Sarah Fernandez, instructional coach, Sonoma Heights Elementary School, Humboldt County School District
Communicating lessons about standards and assessment throughout the district

As the working group developed its recommendations, it was important that solutions reflected the unique needs, context, and district culture of Humboldt County. “Rather than ANet telling us where we were wrong, they helped us uncover problems and solutions on our own, which made everyone more willing to engage,” says Noel Morton, Humboldt’s director of performance. The working group collaboratively developed guidance that pointed schools and teachers to trusted resources aligned with high-quality curriculum. They also found places to cut down on interim and short-cycle assessments where testing was too frequent to be useful.

The working group developed a gradual rollout timeline for changes, from 2017 through 2019. First, they presented findings and recommendations to the school board. In the upcoming year, they will bring those same findings to each school. Every school leader will have a chance to replicate pieces of the working group review model with their teachers as a professional development exercise. Teachers will go through the process themselves to understand the rationale behind the assessment and curriculum changes coming soon, and build new understanding of learning standards and of assessment quality.

On a broader scale, the assessment strategy process helped Humboldt County reflect on their school improvement strategy and concurrent strategic planning process. Superintendent Dr. David Jensen said he recognized that “We needed a systematic approach. Previously, we had tried school-by-school fixes, but we realized as a district, we needed to be the driver and manager of innovation and change around assessment.” As a result, he worked with his staff and school board not only to address challenges with assessment but also to strengthen areas of the district’s strategic plan, including curriculum and instruction.

LESSONS FROM OUR PARTNERS
The assessment strategy process influenced the direction of a new district strategic plan.
Takeaways

Each of the case studies illustrates how districts can transform their assessment strategies and bring testing back into line with their vision and goals for teaching and learning.

Working together with ANet to bring a critical eye to their assessment systems helped the districts:

- **Lift up the value of instructional assessments**, and ensure that evaluation doesn’t overtake teaching and learning.
- **Weed out low-quality assessments**, identify existing high-quality assessments, and build capacity to understand and use quality assessments effectively.
- **Identify gaps in educators’ understanding** of grade-level standards, and build their capacity to bring standards to life in their classrooms.
- **Move forward** to adopt or improve implementation of high-quality curricula.

Although the districts faced different challenges and designed different solutions, the end result in each case was a healthier, more coherent assessment strategy that puts instruction first. Through the process of examining assessment purpose and quality, district leaders, school leaders, and teachers in each district were able to focus on the most important goal: gaining better information to support high-quality instruction and improve learning for all students.

Importantly, all of these districts describe their work on assessment strategy as still unfolding. ANet was proud to partner with these districts and support them in their work, but we also know that the most impactful work happens as improvements come to life in the classroom. Long-term change in school systems is complex work, but it starts from a clear vision and strong, informed decision-making.

*We hope this paper offers inspiration to other system leaders and that the road map it provides enables them to take on their toughest assessment challenges.*
Results Matter

As a nonprofit dedicated to educational equity, we need to know our work has an impact. And so do our 800+ partner schools and systems.

ANet schools with the right conditions in place see 6 months of additional learning over 2 years.

90% of leaders whose schools made major progress say ANet was key to their success.

Harvard University’s Center for Education Policy Research conducted a randomized control study funded by a prestigious i3 (Investing in Innovation) grant from the DOE. They found that when schools have the right basic conditions in place and partner with ANet, they achieve six months of additional learning over a two-year period.

90% of leaders whose schools made major progress say ANet was key to their success.

Most of us trust the experience of our peers more than statistics or unfamiliar organizations. So we’re proud that the majority of our partners value ANet’s support and would recommend us to their colleagues.

At the end of last year, we asked partner school leaders to assess the progress their school had made on each of ANet’s Leader Levers. 90% of those who said they had made major progress on all five thought their partnership with ANet was key to those gains.
Year after year, in school after school, ANet’s support helps schools boost student learning.

3 years
outpacing peers

In Colorado, ANet partner schools outpaced statewide gains in ELA and Math for the third year in a row.

4x growth

In Chicago, for the second year in a row, ANet partners’ average growth was almost 4 times that of non-ANet schools on the city’s annual school report card.

2x growth

In Michigan and Ohio, ANet partners outpaced their peer schools in economically-disadvantaged communities by more than two times in ELA and Math.

+5
MATH
+8
ELA

In Eastern Massachusetts, ANet schools in economically-disadvantaged communities significantly outpaced their peer schools.

3x
ELA

In New York, ANet schools made proficiency gains that were 3x more in ELA and 2x more in math than non-ANet schools in the state.

2x
MATH

Tier 1

Louisiana’s DOE conducted the first independent review of instructional materials and gave ANet’s interim assessments—both ELA and math—their top rating. We’re the only organization so honored.

ELL/SPED

Even in schools with high ELL or special education populations, ANet schools made significantly greater gains.

ANet has helped strengthen our school’s instructional culture, particularly in implementing the Common Core shifts and understanding the rigor that undergirds the instructional practices.”
— Principal, D.C.

We have been partnering with ANet for 5 years and are truly thankful for how the assessments and coaching help us improve as a school.”
— Principal, Mass.
For questions about ANet’s System Advising work, contact Molly Depasquale (mdepasquale@achievementnetwork.org).

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