

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Literacy Assessment

What Everyone Needs to Know

Reading and writing are complex areas to assess. No single assessment can include all aspects of these complex processes. What's more, there are multiple purposes for literacy assessment, and no single assessment can serve all purposes. Together, these facts make it clear that literacy assessment is much more complicated than many realize. In short, literacy assessment needs to reflect the multiple dimensions of reading and writing *and* the various purposes for assessment as well as the diversity of the students being assessed.

Two general types of assessment are as follows:

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1. *Summative assessment*, which includes state tests and end-of-course or subject exams designed to measure achievement at the end of an instructional sequence or time frame. The results of summative assessments are used by a host of stakeholders including parents, school and district administrators, and state and national policymakers to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning over a designated course of instruction.
2. *Ongoing assessment*, which includes formative and interim assessments used for screening, progress monitoring, and evaluating student needs. These types of ongoing assessments are used by teachers, students and, at times, school administrators throughout the school year to inform everyday teaching and learning.

Current State of Literacy Assessment

Summative assessments have dominated the public discourse on literacy assessment and student achievement for over a decade, primarily because they are at the heart of state and national accountability systems in the United States. They are often referred to as “high stakes” because important decisions about students, teachers, schools, districts, states, and the nation may rest on student performance on these tests.

High-stakes decisions are often based on a single administration of a single assessment even though a single test cannot assess everything that is important and is unlikely to work equally well for all students. This means that high-stakes assessments rarely produce the information needed to improve teaching and learning.

The problems with high-stakes *summative assessments* have not gone unnoticed by K–12 parents, teachers, and district administrators. A 2014 survey revealed that these stakeholders want *ongoing assessments* throughout the school year to balance *summative assessments* at the end of the school year. (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2014)

What Constitutes Good Literacy Assessment?

The quality and utility of both *summative* and *ongoing* literacy assessments is dependent on the context and consequences of their use. To be meaningful and useful, all literacy assessments must provide some value added for teaching and learning (International Reading Association, 2010a).

Summative assessments can provide information following instruction about which students or groups of students achieved specific benchmarks and which did not. These assessments are most useful when the results are used to generate hypotheses about the efficacy of a particular instructional approach, which can then be used to explore possible adjustments.

Ongoing assessments can provide information during instruction that identifies students' strengths and weaknesses, suggests alternative instructional approaches, and models the kind of thinking students can engage in when they self-assess. These assessments are most useful when the timeliness of the information enables teachers to modify instruction quickly, while learning is in progress, and the students can use the results to adjust and improve their own learning (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007).

Adverse consequences from literacy assessments can arise in a variety of ways. For example, *summative assessments* that publicly value only a narrow range of literacy outcomes promote a narrowing of the curriculum for students. This routinely occurs in the United States through high-stakes accountability testing.

However, *ongoing assessments* can also narrow the curriculum, sometimes as a result of efforts to improve performance on high-stakes tests. Illustrations of this are when classroom assessment focuses on multiple-choice tests designed to mimic the end-of-year *summative assessments* or when evaluative feedback on student writing focuses only on spelling and grammar rather than students' thinking, substantive content, or organization or when classroom assessment focuses primarily on reading speed.

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The potential consequences of assessment results, both positive and negative, must be considered as educators choose and use assessment practices and tools.

It is commonplace to talk about different purposes for assessment and to invoke the principle that the assessment must match the purpose for which it is intended. In practice, this has been largely ignored. Test publishers make claims regarding the utility of their tests regardless of the purposes for which they are used. Truly embracing the concept of different measures for different purposes means employing different criteria for selecting assessments used for different purposes.

For example, when a teacher employs *ongoing assessments* such as observing and documenting a student's oral reading behaviors and uses that information to inform instruction, the data might not be as reliable, in a technical sense, as a test used for the *summative assessments*. However, in the context of the teacher's professional knowledge, the data are more likely to lead to productive consequences such as the improvement of teaching and learning. Too often, assessments are chosen for technical measurement properties rather than for the likelihood of productive consequences for students and teachers.

Multiple purposes for assessment should be clearly identified and appropriate tools and techniques employed. Not all available tools and techniques are appropriate for all purposes, and different assessments—even in the same language or literacy domain—capture different skills and knowledge. Care should be taken particularly in selecting assessments for students who are English learners or who speak an English dialect that differs from mainstream dialects (International Reading Association, 2010b).

Finally, all assessments—regardless of purpose—should provide useful and timely information about desired literacy goals. They should be composed of authentic literacy activities as opposed to contrived texts or tasks generated specifically for assessment purposes. The quality of assessment information should not be sacrificed for the efficiency of an assessment procedure.

It is incumbent upon all users and consumers of literacy assessments to interpret results within the context of the purpose for which an assessment is best suited, the specific literacy skills and knowledge being evaluated, and the potential of the assessment to improve teaching and learning.

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Principal Author

Karen Wixson, Director, Reading NAEP, Educational Testing Service

Panel Chair

Diane Lapp, San Diego State University

Panel Members

Donna Alvermann, University of Georgia

Jim Anderson, University of British Columbia

Christine Garbe, University of Cologne, Germany

Gay Ivey, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Robert Jiménez, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Melanie Kuhn, Purdue University College of Education

Stuart McNaughton, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Heidi Anne E. Mesmer, Virginia Tech

Ernest Morrell, Teachers College, Columbia University

David Reinking, Clemson University

Deborah Rowe, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Misty Sailors, University of Texas at San Antonio

Sheila Valencia, University of Washington

Amy Wilson-Lopez, Utah State University

Jo Worthy, University of Texas, Austin

William Teale, University of Illinois at Chicago, President and Board Liaison, International Literacy Association

Diane Barone, University of Nevada, Reno, Immediate Past President, International Literacy Association

Marcie Craig Post, Executive Director, International Literacy Association



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Media Contact: For all media inquiries, please contact press@reading.org.

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