

## Assessment Through the Student's Eyes

By Rick Stiggins

### **Rather than sorting students into winners and losers, assessment for learning can put all students on a winning streak.**

Historically, a major role of assessment has been to detect and highlight differences in student learning in order to rank students according to their achievement. Such assessment experiences have produced winners and losers. Some students succeed early and build on winning streaks to learn more as they grow; others fail early and often, falling farther and farther behind.

As we all know, the mission of schools has changed. Today's schools are less focused on merely sorting students and more focused on helping *all* students succeed in meeting standards. This evolution in the mission of schools means that we can't let students who have not yet met standards fall into losing streaks, succumb to hopelessness, and stop trying.

Our evolving mission compels us to embrace a new vision of assessment that can tap the wellspring of confidence, motivation, and learning potential that resides within every student. First, we need to tune in to the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the point of view of students—both assessment winners and assessment losers. These two groups experience assessment practices in vastly different ways, as shown in “The Assessment Experience,” p. 24. To enable all students to experience the productive emotional dynamics of winning, we need to move from exclusive reliance on assessments that verify learning to the use of assessments that support learning—that is, assessments *for* learning.

### **The Assessment Experience**

For Students on Winning Streaks	For Students on Losing Streaks
<i>Assessment results provide</i>	<i>Assessment results provide</i>
Continual evidence of success	Continual evidence of failure

<i>The student feels</i>	<i>The student feels</i>
Hopeful and optimistic	Hopeless
Empowered to take productive action	Initially panicked, gives way to resignation
<i>The student thinks</i>	<i>The student thinks</i>
It's all good. I'm doing fine.	This hurts. I'm not safe here.
See the trend? I succeed as usual.	I just can't do this . . . again.
I want more success.	I'm confused. I don't like this—help!
School focuses on what I do well.	Why is it always about what I can't do?
I know what to do next.	Nothing I try seems to work.
Feedback helps me.	Feedback is criticism. It hurts.
Public success feels good.	Public failure is embarrassing.
<i>The student becomes more likely to</i>	<i>The student becomes more likely to</i>
Seek challenges.	Seek what's easy.
Seek exciting new ideas.	Avoid new concepts and approaches.
Practice with gusto.	Become confused about what to practice.
Take initiative.	Avoid initiative.
Persist in the face of setbacks.	Give up when things become challenging.
Take risks and stretch—go for it!	Retreat and escape—trying is too dangerous!
<i>These actions lead to</i>	<i>These actions lead to</i>
Self-enhancement	Self-defeat, self-destruction
Positive self-fulfilling prophecy	Negative self-fulfilling prophecy
Acceptance of responsibility	Denial of responsibility

Manageable stress	High stress
Feeling that success is its own reward	No feelings of success; no reward
Curiosity, enthusiasm	Boredom, frustration, fear
Continuous adaptation	Inability to adapt

## **Assessment *for* Learning**

Assessment for learning turns day-to-day assessment into a teaching and learning process that enhances (instead of merely monitoring) student learning. Extensive research conducted around the world shows that by consistently applying the principles of assessment for learning, we can produce impressive gains in student achievement, especially for struggling learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Assessment for learning begins when teachers share achievement targets with students, presenting those expectations in student-friendly language accompanied by examples of exemplary student work. Then, frequent self-assessments provide students (and teachers) with continual access to descriptive feedback in amounts they can manage effectively without being overwhelmed. Thus, students can chart their trajectory toward the transparent achievement targets their teachers have established.

The students' role is to strive to understand what success looks like, to use feedback from each assessment to discover where they are now in relation to where they want to be, and to determine how to do better the next time. As students become increasingly proficient, they learn to generate their own descriptive feedback and set goals for what comes next on their journey.

Teachers and students are partners in the assessment for learning process. For example, teachers might have students study samples of work that vary in quality and collaborate in creating their own student-friendly version of a performance assessment scoring rubric. Or students might create practice versions of multiple-choice tests that parallel the content of an upcoming final exam, which they can then use to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses and to focus their final preparation for that exam. Students can accumulate evidence of their learning in growth portfolios. They can also become partners with teachers in communicating about their own learning successes by leading their parent/teacher conferences.

Assessment for learning provides both students and teachers with understandable information in a form they can use immediately to improve performance. In this context, students become both self-assessors and consumers of assessment information. As they experience and understand their own improvement over time, learners begin to sense that success is within reach if they keep trying. This process can put them on a winning streak and keep them there.

When we use assessment for learning, assessment becomes far more than merely a one-time event stuck onto the end of an instructional unit. It becomes a series of interlaced experiences

that enhance the learning process by keeping students confident and focused on their progress, even in the face of occasional setbacks.

The goal of assessment for learning is not to eliminate failure, but rather to keep failure from becoming chronic and thus inevitable in the mind of the learner. Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski has pointed out that the key to winning is to avoid losing twice in a row (Kanter, 2004, p. 251). He meant that if you lose once and fix it, you can remain confident. Losing twice, though, can raise questions, crack that confidence, and make recovery more difficult. So when learners suffer a failure, we must get them back to success as quickly as possible to restore their confidence in their capabilities. This is the emotional dynamic of assessment for learning.

## **Redefining Our Assessment Future**

We know how to deliver professional development that will give practitioners the tools and technologies they need to use assessment effectively in the service of student success. (Stiggins et al., 2004; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). Thus far, however, the immense potential of assessment for learning has gone largely untapped because we have failed to deliver the proper tools into the hands of teachers and school leaders. If we are to fulfill our mission of leaving no child behind, we must adjust our vision of excellence in assessment in at least two important ways that will help us balance assessment *of* and assessment *for* learning.

First, we must expand the criteria by which we evaluate the quality of our assessments at all levels and in all contexts. Traditionally, we have judged quality in terms of the attributes of the resulting scores; these scores must lead to valid and reliable inferences about student achievement. As a result, schools have lavished attention on characteristics of the instruments that produce such scores. In the future, however, we must recognize that assessment is about far more than the test score's dependability—it also must be about the score's effect on the learner. Even the most valid and reliable assessment cannot be regarded as high quality if it causes a student to give up.

We must begin to evaluate our assessments in terms of both the quality of the evidence they yield and the effect they have on future learning. High-quality assessments encourage further learning; low-quality assessments hinder learning. Understanding the emotional dynamics of the assessment experience from the student's perspective is crucial to the effective use of assessments to improve schools.

Second, we must abandon the limiting belief that adults represent the most important assessment consumers or data-based decision makers in schools. Students' thoughts and actions regarding assessment results are at least as important as those of adults. The students' emotional reaction to results will determine what they do in response. Whether their score is high or low, students respond productively when they say, "I understand. I know what to do next. I can handle this. I choose to keep trying." From here on, the result will be more learning. The counterproductive response is, "I don't know what this means. I have no idea what to do next. I'm probably too dumb to learn this anyway. I give up." Here, the learning stops.

In standards-driven schools, only one of these responses works, especially for students who have yet to meet standards.

Assessment *for* learning is about eliciting that productive response to assessment results from students every time. It can produce winning streaks for *all* students.

## References

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