

Benchmark assessments

This reference article discusses the concept of benchmark assessments, including arguments for and against standardized benchmark testing and best practices in creating teacher-developed benchmark assessments.

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Benchmark assessments are short tests administered throughout the school year that give teachers immediate feedback on how students are meeting academic standards. Regular use of benchmark assessments is seen by many as a tool to measure student growth and design curriculum to meet individual learning needs.¹

Standardized benchmark assessments

Typically, on the school-wide level, benchmark testing couples student performance with extensive reporting systems in order to break down test results by the same student categories required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (i.e. race, income, disability, and English proficiency) in addition to providing individual progress reports at the district, school, classroom, and student levels.²

According to the California Department of Education, benchmark assessments often include performance tasks, but more frequently use “standardized administration and scoring procedures to help maintain validity, reliability, and fairness.”³ Teachers usually administer common benchmark assessments to all students in the same course and grade level in the district at prescribed intervals — most often at the end of a unit of study or at the end of a quarter. “Common assessment instruments measure proficiency on subsets of standards and might include writing samples, literary responses, oral reports, demonstrations showing understanding of how-to-manuals, dramatizations, open-ended mathematics problems, memory maps, laboratory investigations, keyboarding or typing tests, and projects using specialized software in the school’s computer lab.”⁴ Teachers can use these standardized assessments to evaluate the degree to which students have mastered selected standards in both their classrooms and to compare with other grade-level classrooms in the district.

Characteristics of standardized benchmark assessments

Standardized benchmark assessments typically:

- are given periodically, from three times a year to as often as once a month;
- focus on reading and mathematics skills, taking about an hour per subject;
- reflect state or district academic-content standards; and

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- measure students' progress through the curriculum and/or on material in state exams.⁵

State-aligned benchmark assessments are generally created for and distributed to school districts by test preparation companies like Edison Schools, Pearson, Princeton Review and ETS.

Critics of high-stakes, standardized benchmark assessments explain that these tests encourage "teaching to the test."⁶ On the other hand, proponents of benchmark assessments claim that when used correctly, these tests have the potential to give specific feedback on the academic areas in which individual students need the most assistance. Supporters also suggest that when benchmarks are created in alignment with state standards, they enable teachers to more accurately "gauge students' performance against district standards."⁷

Teacher-developed benchmark assessments

Myra Pasquier and Susan Gomez-Zwiep (2006) recommend several tips to teachers wanting to create their own benchmark assessments to measure students' developmental growth.⁸ First, Pasquier and Gomez-Zwiep suggest that questions must be worded carefully so that the expected answer is clear to students and that each question must be structured around an end goal. Pasquier and Gomez-Zwiep also advise that teachers use clear rubrics to demonstrate what their expectations are for student work. Developing appropriate benchmark assessments takes time and practice; consequently, Pasquier and Gomez-Zwiep caution teachers to be patient and to improve their own content knowledge before implementing benchmark assessments in their practice.

Notes

1. "What Are Benchmark Assessments and How Do They Work?" Retrieved 13 May 2009 from *EdEvidence: Newsletter of the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands*. Website: <http://www.relnei.org/newsletters.php?nlid=19&nlapno=6> [return]
2. Olson, L. (2005). "Benchmark Assessments Offer Regular Achievement." *Education Week*. 25(13). [return]
3. California Department of Education Publication. "Common Benchmark Assessments" Retrieved 13 May from *Taking Center Stage -- Act II: A Portal for Middle Grades Educators*. Website: <http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/TCSII/ch2/comnbchmrkassess.aspx> [return]
4. California Department of Education Publication. [return]
5. Olson, L. (2005). [return]
6. Zehr, M.A. (2006). "Monthly Checkups." *Education Week*. 25(35). [return]
7. Olson, (2004). "TESTING." *Education Week*. 23(20). [return]
8. Pasquier, M. & Gomz-Zwiep, S. (2006). "Developing Benchmark Assessments: A Teacher Perspective." Retrieved 13 May 2009 from *Center for the Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning*. Website: http://www.caesl.org/conference2006/Benchmark_poster.pdf [return]