



## **PaSLP Essential Element 3**

### **Essential Element 3: Assessment**

An assessment system that addresses the dual purposes of assessment (i.e., accountability and informing decision-making) is a critical component of a district comprehensive literacy plan. An effective assessment plan requires the inclusion of technically adequate information, multiple measures, and provides opportunities for educators to learn how to administer, analyze, interpret, and apply data results to inform instructional practices and improve student learning.

#### **Rationale**

Evidence from effective school research indicates that the use of assessment results for identifying student, classroom, and school needs is highly related to school success (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Marzano, 2003; Williams, 2010). Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez (2005), who worked with multiple schools to improve literacy instruction, found that instructional practices and student learning were enhanced when teachers had a deeper understanding of how data could be used to improve literacy instruction.

Assessment has multiple purposes and multiple audiences. Teachers administer, analyze, and interpret results of both formal and informal assessment tools to assess student strengths and needs, and to plan, implement, and evaluate instruction. Administrators and teachers use classroom, grade level, and school results to make curricular decisions and to select materials for school-level use. School districts make decisions about long-term planning and resource allocation based on assessment results, which provides them with information about school strengths and needs. They also share building level and school level data with the community. Likewise, teachers share individual student data with families or caregivers to inform them about individual students. States and the federal government make decisions to inform policy related to school improvement and to determine what resources schools should receive. In other words, in addition to providing data for accountability purposes at the classroom, school, and district-wide levels, assessment results can provide information important for making instructional decisions for individuals and groups of students.

Given its multiple purposes, a strong multi-dimensional assessment system is imperative to developing and implementing an effective literacy program for all students at all levels. However, assessment is not beneficial unless it aligns closely with the goals and instruction of the school; therefore, the need to align assessments to concise and powerful standards that allow students, parents, and educators to gauge and monitor student performance (National Research Council, 1996; Hamilton, Halverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, & Wayman, 2009). A well-aligned system of assessment that measures what is essential at specific grade levels and, at the same time, enables schools to look longitudinally at the achievement of students is an essential aspect of a comprehensive school plan. A comprehensive assessment system should include summative, formative, benchmark, and diagnostic tests, each of which is used for specific purposes. (See the Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System (SAS) Framework for more information.)



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In developing a comprehensive assessment plan, there is a responsibility to consider many different types of data. As indicated in Guiding Principle 4, Bernhardt's (2013) framework identifies four types of data crucial for district decision-making which includes: demographic, perceptual, program, and outcome data. The results of these types of data and the interactions between and among them can be analyzed and used to make decisions about programs, practices, and policies. The PA Literacy Needs Assessment identifies six requirements of a well-developed assessment plan.

Requirements of a Needs Assessment Plan (PA Literacy Needs Assessment, PDE)

1. District personnel provide leadership for literacy assessment.
2. District selects literacy assessment measures that are valid and reliable and provide information on the essential elements of literacy instruction.
3. District has developed capacity to gather and use data.
4. Assessments are administered in a timely manner and with standardized procedures.
5. Formative and summative evaluations are incorporated at all grade spans.
6. Data are reviewed regularly by administrators and teachers, and instruction and support are adjusted accordingly across the district.

A comprehensive assessment system prevents a reliance on testing in which a single test score determines student placement, educational policy, or teacher evaluation. The International Literacy Association (ILA) addresses the inherent problems with making decisions based on a single measure and acknowledges the importance of varied assessments for the purposeful collection of data to inform instruction (ILA, 2010). In a benchmark study, Valencia & Buly (2004) gave diagnostic tests to students who had failed the fourth-grade statewide reading assessment measure, assessing students' skills in word identification, meaning, and fluency. Most students did not need support in all three areas; rather, they more often had a specific category of weakness. According to these researchers, different instruction was needed for these various profiles of students. Moreover, Valencia & Buly (2004) cautioned educators from using the results of a single outcome measure to make instructional decisions about students. They found that assessments and instruction have a dynamic reciprocity in both measuring progress and providing informative data to shape effective and responsive instruction.

Morsy, Kieffer, & Snow (2010) recommended a system that includes standardized tests along with on-going formal and informal measures. An effective assessment framework identifies both strengths and needs and provides multiple sources of evidence to measure the influence of instruction. Additionally, appropriate interpretation and context of test data are imperative to improving teaching and learning (IRA & NCTE, 2007; ILA, 2010). A robust system, with thoughtful, appropriate interpretation, allows educators to determine the effectiveness of instruction in advancing student achievement to grade-level benchmarks. Pennsylvania Department of Education's Standards Aligned System (SAS) includes "Assessments" as one of the six areas essential for promoting student achievement, exemplifying the need for alignment among assessment, instruction, and clear standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)



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legislation (2015) provides states with more flexibility in developing assessment policies. Specifically, the legislation encourages the development of measures that: assess high-level skills, especially using technology; provide for accommodations for ELs and those with disabilities; eliminate redundancy in testing; and promote innovation and creativity. At the same time, the legislation mandates the reporting of assessment data at specific grade levels and the disaggregation of data for subgroups.

One of the most important uses of assessment is its value in informing instruction. Literacy researchers have found that classroom-based assessments were systematically used on a regular basis in effective schools (Cunningham, 2006; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999; Taylor, 2015). Educators in these schools used results to identify needs, group students, and make decisions about instruction. Teachers could talk with great insight about what students could and could not do in various components of literacy. The report, *Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making* (Hamilton, Halverson, Jackson, Mandinach, Supovitz, & Wayman, 2009) provides a useful checklist for schools developing an assessment plan for using data to inform instruction. Another useful resource is the module, *Using Data for Decision Making*.

The systematic and thoughtful interpretation of assessment results can affect responsive, data-informed practice. In a position statement about assessment, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SCE) highlight the importance of reliable, valid, and fair assessments to improve student learning (2003). To that end, educators need to be knowledgeable and develop expertise about the purpose of a measurement, literacy development, and effective pedagogical practices.

There is overwhelming consensus among national professional organizations of the importance of literacy assessment (ILA, 2010; 2013; 2014; NAEYC & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education [NAECS/SDE], 2003). In 2009, NAEYC and IRA joined forces to publish a document, *Where We Stand: On Learning to Read and Write*, that addressed literacy assessments for early learners. According to these organizations, policies about assessment for young learners should emphasize more comprehensive assessment tools and responsive teaching. The NAEYC (2009) position statement highlighted the importance of such assessments for young English Learners (ELs). Below, some key ideas for assessing English Learners are provided.

The key to assessing ELs is to assess what they know, not what they do not know (English). Some things to consider are how ELs might show or demonstrate what they know, given that language structures and test formats may be barriers to students' abilities to understand the task or question, or to producing the answer. Some guiding ideas include:

- Assess what has been taught;
- Assess in the same way student was taught (e.g., visuals, manipulatives, scaffolds, graphic organizers, etc.);



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- Design assessments to reflect the language proficiency of students;
- Allow for performance-based assessments, oral reports, poster presentations, and other assessment formats that reduce the language demand; and
- Test the concept, not necessarily language.

### **Implications**

An effective assessment system must be congruent with and based on state standards, as well as the goals, curriculum, and instruction of a school or district. The Pennsylvania SAS provides a comprehensive approach for student achievement. The assessment portion of SAS encompasses elements of assessments for federal and state initiatives, as well as classroom-based assessments for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The four types of assessments recommended are summative, formative, benchmark, and diagnostic. The following charts include definitions of each type of assessment and examples of such measures.

### **Types of Assessments**

**Summative Assessments** seek to make an overall judgment of progress made at the end of a defined period of instruction. They occur at the end of a school level, grade, or course, or are administered at certain grades for purposes of state or local accountability. They are designed to produce clear data on student accomplishments at key points in the academic career of the student. They also provide accountability or outcome information about a school or district's performance.

#### *Examples:*

- Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)
- Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA)
- Keystone End-of-Course Exams
- End-of-unit exams
- Final exams

**Formative Assessments** are classroom-based assessments that allow teachers to monitor and adjust their instructional practices to meet individual student needs. Teachers use formative assessment strategies during instruction to provide feedback to students. This feedback allows teachers to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve student achievement of intended instructional outcomes. Formative assessments can occur during lessons or observations of students in classrooms, or they can consist of more formalized instruments that also require qualitative analysis by teachers.

#### *Examples:*

- Running records, response logs, graphic organizers, curriculum-based measures, portfolios, projects
- Observational tools: thumbs-up, exit slips, questioning, discussion, think-pair-share



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**Benchmark Assessments** are designed to provide feedback to both the teacher and the student about how the student is progressing toward demonstrating proficiency on state grade level standards. Well-designed benchmark assessments are standards-based assessments that measure the degree to which a student has mastered a given concept. These assessments measure concepts, skills, and/or applications. Benchmark assessments are reported by referencing the standards, not the performance of other students. They also measure performance regularly, not only at a single moment in time.

*Examples:*

- Vendor Developed – 4Sight, Acuity, Assess2Know, DIBELS®Next, Acadience™ Reading, AimsWeb (R-CBM, MAZE and Early Literacy Assessments)
- District and School Developed – common assessments administered across a grade level with a common rubric that benchmarks achievement by referencing state standards

**Diagnostic Assessments** determine student strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills. Administering diagnostic assessments permits the instructor to intervene at the point where students begin to struggle (such as in MTSS-Rtl) or when they are performing below grade level expectations. Diagnostic assessments allow teachers to adjust the curriculum to meet the unique needs of all students.

*Examples:*

- GRADE, Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDTs), CORE: Multiple Measures; Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)

### **A Comprehensive Assessment System**

A highly developed assessment system includes authentic reading and writing tasks, a balanced approach to using formal and informal assessments, classroom-based evidence that shows growth over time, and more involvement of students in the evaluation of their own work. Multiple assessment tools are used in system-wide assessment plans to ensure an accurate picture of student achievement. Such assessment practices are in line with 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills and will contribute to the success of Pennsylvania students in a world that requires complex literacy skills and abilities.

A well-developed assessment system can contribute to school district and system improvement (See Appendix C for a resource for creating an Assessment and Analysis Plan). The adoption of a systemic approach enhances the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning practices. This system should include assessment tools that are congruent with the district's goals and curriculum. Stakeholders can use the results of assessment data in a variety of ways.



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For example:

- Teachers can use assessments before, during, and after instruction to provide feedback and adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve student achievement, and to provide appropriate challenges for all students at their instructional levels. Groups of teachers can meet in data teams or professional learning communities to discuss results of data and the implications for instructional decision making.
- Students can be asked to self-evaluate their work as a means of developing their knowledge and understanding of what they know and do not know.
- Parents and families or caregivers can be kept informed of plans for teaching and learning, and the progress being made by their children.
- School leaders can use the information for school-wide planning, to support teachers, and determine professional development needs.
- Pennsylvania school boards can use the results of assessments to assist in their decision-making for school improvement.

### **PA Assessment System**

In 2010, the Pennsylvania State Board of Education determined that all LEAs should design an assessment system to do the following:

- Determine the degree to which students are achieving academic standards and their progress toward college and career readiness;
- Improve curriculum and instructional practices using assessment results grounded in both what students have learned and areas of need;
- Provide information requested by PDE regarding the achievement of academic standards; and
- Provide summary information, including results of assessments to the public.

To support districts in the development of their assessment system, Pennsylvania provides guidance, resources, and materials. The Bureau of Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction is responsible for the development, administration, scoring, and reporting of the state's assessment system. State assessments include the following:

- Pennsylvania State System of Assessment (PSSA)
- Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA), for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities
- Keystones

The Bureau provides direction to schools and districts on assessment and accountability systems, evaluates school and student progress, and reports school performance. Other functions include the development of assessment anchors to better align curricula, instruction, and assessment practices throughout the state; coordination of test development,



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administration, and reporting; and providing technical assistance for statewide and local assessment systems.

Resources for assessment are also available on Pennsylvania's SAS website. For instance, the Classroom Diagnostic Tools for English Language Arts are available to every district in Pennsylvania at no cost. These tools can aid educators in identifying needs and strengths at the grade level, classroom level, and individual student level. On SAS, teachers can also create assessments through the "Assessment Builder," look for a variety of resources through the "Materials and Resources" tab and obtain information on the PSSA and Keystone Exams.