

## National Task Force ON ASSESSMENT EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS



## Assessment Literacy Defined

### Overview

In an effort to address the need for assessment-literate educators in a positive way, the National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers was launched in October 2015. The Task Force is comprised of three advisors and 24 educators from 17 states, including pre-service and in-service educators, assessment experts and thought leaders. The goal of the Task Force is to be a collective voice that elevates the national dialogue on assessment education, develops innovative approaches to assessment literacy, and advances existing best practices in assessment. *The National Task Force is pictured above in Washington, DC, in February 2016.*

### The National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers

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## The National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers - *Continued*

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## Abstract

*Assessment* is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform education-related decisions. The impact of decisions turns on the quality of the evidence gathered, which in turn, depends on the quality of the assessment, and associated practices, used to gather it. Those who are *assessment literate* understand how to gather dependable evidence and how to use it productively to support or certify achievement. Regardless of their level of involvement in the education process, they understand the importance of:

- Beginning assessment with a clear purpose;
- Starting with clear and specific learning target(s) to be assessed;
- Building high-quality assessments to fit this intended context;
- Communicating results in ways that assure understanding by recipients, and;
- Linking assessment and student motivation in ways that keep all students striving for academic success.

Unfortunately, very often education practitioners, students, and stakeholders in the community face the challenges of educational assessment without having been given the opportunity to develop the levels of

assessment literacy needed to succeed in meeting those challenges. This Task Force's mission is to promote deeper understanding of sound assessment practice throughout the fabric of American education.

## Definition

**Assessment** is the process of gathering information about student learning to inform education-related decisions. Assessments can reflect a wide variety of learning targets using a range of methods serving many important users and uses at a variety of levels from the classroom to the boardroom. In this sense, assessment is an essential part of the teaching and learning process.

Our assessments work best in contexts of strong assessment literacy, and they fail us when assessment literacy is lacking. One becomes **assessment literate** by mastering basic principles of sound assessment practice, coming to believe strongly in their consistent, high-quality application in order to meet the diverse needs of all students, and acting assertively based on those values. The specific nature of those applications vary with one's role in the educational process. The definition of assessment literacy presented below details the universal understandings and beliefs that underpin sound practice regardless of role and then analyzes how they play out by role.

## The Universal Meaning of Assessment Literacy

### **Assessment Purpose**

An assessment literate person understands that it is not possible to conduct a sound assessment without a clear and specific purpose. The purpose is clarified through answers to three contextual questions:

- Who will use the results?
- What will they use them to accomplish?
- And, therefore, what information about student learning does the user need?

In all contexts, the assessment must be specifically designed, developed, and conducted to supply the information needed to serve the intended user(s). Only then can it work in the service of student learning.

Further, an assessment literate person understands that district assessment systems must take into account and balance the needs of users throughout the local context. These systems can, and must, serve a variety of levels of applications, including continuous day-to-day classroom users, common benchmark assessments for progress monitoring (every few months), and annual assessments. In addition, balanced local systems also rely on assessments to:

- Assist teachers in supporting student learning
- Help students promote their own growth (“assessment for learning”)<sup>1</sup>
- Inform judgments of the sufficiency of learning given established expectations (“summative assessment of learning”).

Assessment literate individuals believe the intended purpose for any assessment is a guiding light—it must serve its user(s) information needs. Assessment purpose must be clear from the very beginning because it anchors the entire assessment process, whether a teacher is designing a task to be performed or a state is deciding which standardized test to adopt. An assessment must be capable of fulfilling its intended purpose by providing relevant, required information.

Assessment literate teachers and school leaders believe that establishing the purpose of any assessment must take into account the importance of all assessment users, especially students whose assessment literacy is critically important as they learn to use assessment results to inform their own learning. Assessment literate individuals also believe that instructional decision makers, at every level, must take into account all relevant and available evidence of student learning and affect to inform their instructional decisions. In other words, all users are entitled to high-quality, understandable assessment results.

### ***Learning Targets***

Assessment literate individuals understand that the learning target(s) to be assessed form the foundation of the tasks, items, or exercise and scoring procedures that will make up the assessment. Indeed, the target(s) of interest determine the assessment method(s) to be used. Therefore, assessors must begin assessment development and use with those learning expectations clearly and unambiguously defined. Finally, those engaged in assessment understand that learning targets vary profoundly in type and complexity across subjects and ascending grade levels, as well as according to individual student needs. For this reason, a variety of assessment methods must come into play in classrooms, in schools, and across local assessment systems.

Assessment literate individuals believe that intended learning target(s) must be clear, appropriate, and available for all involved—most importantly students—to see from the outset of instruction and assessment. In addition, they believe that assessors themselves must be confident, competent masters of the learning targets to be reflected in the assessment.

### ***Assessment Quality***

Assessment literate individuals understand that the assessment is comprised of exercises that present challenges to the examinee and elicit a response to be evaluated in terms of performance criteria. They understand that, regardless of their origin (inside or beyond the classroom) or format (e.g., oral, written, or performed),

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<sup>1</sup> Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes. *Distinguishing Formative Assessment from other Educational Assessment Labels*, CCSSO (2012), prepared by the Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) SCASS.

assessments must be valid; that is, tailored to fit the context as defined by the purpose to be served, target to be reflected, and the needs of students. Given this, they understand that assessors must rely on methods capable of providing the evidence needed to support a strong inference about student mastery of the learning target(s) in question. Everything from item or exercise selection to scoring or evaluation procedures must allow the assessor to draw sound conclusions about student learning at that point in time. To that end assessment literate individuals are expected to design assessments that are responsive and engaging for students of all cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Assessment literate people believe the results of high-quality assessments accurately reflect the extent of student mastery of the learning target. Assessments must do so if sound instructional decisions are to be made on the basis of those results.

### ***Communication of Assessment Results***

Assessment literate people understand that the quality and impact of any assessment is a direct function of the effectiveness of the communication of the resulting information to its intended users. Truly effective communication places resulting information in the hands of users in a timely and understandable manner. The standard of timeliness is determined by when the decision is to be made; for example -- whether a student is making revision decisions, a teacher is designing the next lesson, a principal is designing a school-wide program, or a district is developing its strategic plan. The format for the communication is a function of the purpose for the assessment. For example, results intended to support learning do not merely list the grade for student performance; rather, they provide feedback in a form and manner that provides guidance about how to do better the next time.

Assessment literate individuals believe the communication of all assessment results should be accompanied by a purposeful check with the recipient (decision maker) to verify their understanding and appreciation of the link between results, the pending instructional decision, and student learning.

### ***Assessment and Motivation***

Assessment literate persons understand that the assessment process can contribute to the productive motivation of both students and teachers. They understand that, for teacher and student alike, fear, vulnerability, and anxiety are the enemies of learning success, while a sense of self-efficacy, confidence, and accomplishment promote ongoing academic success. On behalf of students, assessment literate people understand that, used effectively in instruction, assessment can cause learning, not merely measure it. It can support learning by engaging students in ongoing self-assessment, so they can see themselves growing and as a result, actually be in charge of their own success.

In the context of teacher motivation, teachers may be inspired to new heights of professional aspiration by students who are demonstrating immense gains in proficiency and by the professional agency to flexibly employ the assessment methods that they know will both take into account and positively impact student learning. Classroom assessment practices in the hands of assessment literate teachers have demonstrated the ability to contribute to this kind of growth. In this spirit, one key role of school leadership is to provide ongoing

opportunities for teachers to develop their assessment literacy so they can better meet diverse individual student needs, promote student growth, and experience invigorating professional success.

Assessment literate people believe that students are entitled to equity of motivation; that is, all students must be given the opportunity to believe that academic success is within reach for them if they strive for it. They believe that the level of assessment application that promotes deep student involvement and well-being is the classroom level. It is there that student and teacher team up to make sound decisions, keep targets clear, gather dependable evidence, and believe success remains within reach. Schools, districts, and states all must create balanced systems of professional support and assessment that nurture student learning. Nested within each successive layer of school contexts, the classroom is where students encounter assessment at the hands of their teachers.

## Assessment Literacy Defined by Role

Each contributor to student academic well-being through assessment translates this universal meaning into specific capabilities defined by their role:

### *Students*

Students understand that they can contribute to their own academic success when they actively seek:

- To understand why their learning is being assessed in each context,
- To understand the learning target they are trying to master,
- To have confidence that they receive accurate information about their learning progress,
- To have the opportunity to ask for and receive the information they need to help them grow, and
- To feel that they have an important role in promoting their own success.

### *Teachers*

An assessment literate teacher:

- Knows how instructional decision making fits into the balanced system of assessment, users of which they are a member,
- Identifies clear and appropriate purposes for each assessment,
- Is a master of the learning targets that are to be assessed,
- Can create and select high-quality assessments aligned to those targets,
- Implements assessments equitably, making appropriate modifications based on student need,
- Employs a variety of assessments that are appropriate for the students and learning targets,
- Analyzes the results of assessments given their knowledge of students, and makes instructional adjustments based on those results,

- Understands how to tailor the communication of results to the needs of the intended user,
- Masters the use of formative assessment to support student learning and can teach students how to act assertively on their own assessment results to take charge of their own learning success,
- Partners with colleagues, their students' families, and the community, using assessment results to identify needs that can be best met collaboratively,
- Sees the development of their assessment literacy as a career-long learning process, and
- Advocates for sound assessment practices in instructional and/or policy settings.

### *School Leader*

An assessment literate principal and district or other school leader:

- Understands and advocates for the development of balanced assessment systems that meet the information needs of all assessment purposes,
- Understands ways in which the school system can both promote and impede good assessment practice, and works to improve the conditions in the system to support good assessment practice,
- Promotes through supervision and policy ethical assessment practices in all contexts,
- Sees learning target clarity and appropriateness as a foundation of sound assessment practice,
- Establishes the expectation that faculty members will continuously develop and hone their assessment literacy, and recognizes the faculty who become leaders and model accomplished assessment practices,
- Sees the development of their own assessment literacy as a career-long learning process,
- Understands how assessment information can be used to strengthen partnerships with students' families and the community,
- Promotes effective communication of results both in formative and summative contexts, and
- Advocates for student involvement in their own learning through the use of assessment as a teaching and learning strategy.

### *College of Education Faculty*

An assessment literate member of a teacher education or administrator preparation faculty:

- Sees the development of their own assessment literacy as a career-long learning process,
- Understands the importance of monitoring and developing their own mastery of the principles of sound assessment,
- Embraces their responsibility to teach sound assessment practices as they apply to the learning of their candidates,
- Models sound practices in their assessments of the achievement of those candidates, and
- Frames the development of assessment literacy for their candidates as a career-long process.

## ***Policy Maker***

Whether working as an assessment literate leader at local, state, or federal levels, as an elected official or as an appointed educational leader, one who sets policy and allocates educational resources does so in ways that:

- Honor the diverse purposes assessment can serve in improving schools,
- Demand ethical uses,
- Promote clear targets,
- Assure assessment literacy throughout the educational system,
- Promote effective communication of assessment results to intended users, and
- Maximize the quality of the motivational environment for students and professional educators.

## ***Parents and Community***

Assessment literate parents and interested community members understand that our students—their children—are entitled to clear targets, quality assessments, effective communication of results and equity of motivation, and they act assertively to protect those rights. In a broader sense, they are advocates for sound assessment practices for the sake of their own children and for nurturing effective schools in their communities.

## ***Collaboration across Roles is Essential***

The development and promotion of an assessment literate school culture is a shared responsibility across roles. All involved must take the initiative in advancing their own expertise throughout their careers, as well as helping others to understand the principles of sound assessment practice. For example, teachers can help parents understand how to advocate for the assessment well-being of their children; supervisors can provide teachers with ongoing opportunities to develop their expertise; college of education faculty and district leaders can partner to give candidates access to clinical experience with assessment; and policy makers can remove barriers to and allocate resources to systematically support the development of assessment literacy. It is only with these kinds of collaboration that we can come to trust one another to gather good evidence of student achievement and use it to promote their academic well-being.

*Note: Task Force members served as intellectual contributors, providing substantial input and ideas to this definition. The definition reflects individual and collective insights of contributing participants, but it does not necessarily reflect an endorsement by any of these individuals or the organizations with which they are affiliated.*



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