

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

What Is Assessment?

When people hear the term “assessment,” they most likely think: *standardized test*. But standardized tests are only one of many forms of assessment used in public education, each of which has its own specialized purpose.

Consider the dashboard on your car: when the check-engine light is on, you know that something might be wrong, but you don't know exactly *what's* wrong. Conversely, even if the check-engine light is not on, there could still be something wrong with your car. Standardized tests are like check-engine lights: they can tell us broad information about how our schools are functioning and our students are performing (for example, that eighth-grade math scores are low), but they don't tell *why* the scores are low or high, what's specifically working or not working in schools.

When it comes to assessment, teachers, students, and policy makers need far more than check-engine lights—they need an entire dashboard of information about the learning process to determine precisely what needs to be adjusted or fixed to meet every learning goal.

How It Works

- ✓ **Tests, exams, and quizzes are important forms of assessment, but teachers need a variety of specialized tools to evaluate student learning.** Exams and quizzes are similar to the diagnostic tests used by physicians: they provide an analysis of what students have learned and help teachers pinpoint things that aren't working. But just as doctors then need to physically investigate the problem before determining how to treat it, teachers employ a variety of methods to ensure that the learning process is functioning optimally: they ask questions to check for comprehension and misunderstanding, they lead in-class discussions with students, they assign essays and research projects to evaluate writing and critical-thinking skills, or they have students give presentations and complete tasks that demonstrate whether students have acquired an in-depth understanding of a topic—all of these examples are forms of assessment, and all of them give educators the detailed information they need to teach students more effectively.
- ✓ **While assessing student learning takes many forms in schools, academic assessment can be divided into three general categories: pre-, post-, and in-process assessments.** *Pre-assessments* determine what students know at the beginning of a lesson, course, or school year, including any learning gaps that will need to be addressed. *Post-assessments* (often called summative assessments) evaluate what students have learned over the course of a defined instructional period, such as a unit, semester, or school year. And *in-process assessments* (or formative assessments) help teachers determine the extent to which students understand the concepts and skills they are being taught *while* they are being taught. All three forms of assessment are invaluable to the teaching process—and when they are looked at together, they give educators a fuller, richer, and more useful picture of teaching effectiveness and student learning.
- ✓ **Student learning is a complex, interconnected process that can break down when even a small element malfunctions.** Take, for example, a student who is struggling to grasp a concept that the other students in the class have already learned. If the teacher waited until the end of a course or school year to evaluate the student, then the problem would not only go overlooked, but it might never be fixed because the problem wasn't identified until it was too late. And if problems are overlooked year after year, learning gaps will only become more severe—and damaging—over time. When teachers frequently assess student learning during the teaching process, engage them in the process, and provide them with timely, high-quality feedback, they can address small learning struggles long before they become more significant educational and insurmountable challenges.

A high-quality education has never been more important than it is right now.

The New England Secondary School Consortium hopes that our Leadership in Action series will spark conversations across the region about how students could be learning in today's high schools.