

Why Should We Use Common Assessments?

Reviews of accountability data from hundreds of schools reveal the schools with the greatest gains in achievement consistently employ common assessments, nonfiction writing, and collaborative scoring by faculty (Reeves, 2004).

Powerful, proven structures for improved results are at hand. “It starts when a group of teachers meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, and then share and create lessons and strategies to improve upon those levels.” (Schmoker, 2004b, p. 48).

“[Common formative assessments provide] regular and timely feedback regarding student attainment of the most critical standards . . . [and] also foster consistent expectations and priorities within a grade level, course, and department regarding standards, instruction, and assessment. . . . Most importantly, common formative assessment results enable educators to diagnose student learning needs accurately in time to make instructional modifications.” (Ainsworth, 2007, pp. 95–96)

The schools and districts that doubled student achievement added another layer of testing—common formative or benchmark assessments. These assessments were designed to provide detailed and concrete information on what students know and do not know with respect to specific learning targets (Odden & Archibald, 2009).

The key to improved student achievement was moving beyond an individual teacher looking at his or her classroom data. Instead, it took getting same-grade teacher teams to meet, analyze the results of each interim assessment to understand what concepts in the curriculum were posing difficulty for students, share ideas, figure out the best interventions, and actually follow up in their classrooms (Christman et al., 2009).

In schools that help students burdened by poverty achieve remarkable success, teachers work in collaborative teams to build common formative assessments and use the data to identify which students need help and which need greater challenges. But they also use data to inform teachers’ practice, to discuss why one teacher is having success in teaching a concept and others are not, and what the more successful teacher can teach his or her colleagues (Chenoweth, 2009).