

Assessment Literacy — What Administrators Really Need to Know

“Putting the focus on learning, not performance will, ironically, *improve* performance”

Joe Boler

Introduction – There are any number of things that America's school administrators are responsible for—either to carry out directly, or to lead others in doing. Many of these leadership responsibilities use student achievement instruments and data in one form or another. Some examples of each include (but are not limited to) the following.

Leadership—Administrators need to

- Monitor the performance of the students in their school or district, using a variety of summative assessments provided by the state or the district. This means they need to understand the types of assessments used, how to read and interpret score report, and to be able to speak to others (such as the board of education) about what the assessment results mean (and don't mean).
- Understand the accountability metrics used to gauge the status and progress of student learning at the building and district levels, meaning to understand the accountability labels applied by the state and how to improve the status of the school and the district
- Know how to use achievement and observation data to hold the educators in the school or district accountable for the performance of the students, of the school as a whole, or the educators who work in the school or district. This may also involve formal evaluations of the quality of work of subordinates.

Leading Others—Administrators need to help subordinates to

- Help others understand the implications of the summative district and school results.
- Help those who work for them to understand that different approaches to assessment are used for different purposes.
- Know that simply assessing students more often will not lead to higher achievement
- Advocate for the need to use assessment practices that actually improve student learning and increase student achievement
- Hold staff accountable for becoming assessment literate, for using assessment practices that support student learning, and providing the opportunities and support for them to do so.

Administrators also need to be able to gauge whether students are learning. There are a variety of approaches that can be used—summative, interim benchmark, and formative assessment strategies. As the building or district leader, is the administrator able help foster the types of assessment practice that encourage in-depth learning and higher achievement? Do administrators understand the elements of a *balanced approach* to assessment, realizing that some assessments serve well the monitoring function, while other practices actually encourage and support learning and achievement? Can they thoughtfully encourage and mentor staff, supporting them as they improve their knowledge about and practice using assessment in support of learning?

It is essential that administrators become *assessment literate*! To not be assessment literate jeopardizes the students being served by not helping them to learn to their potential. It may also put the administrator's career in jeopardy, and may also jeopardize the careers of those who teach in the building. The stakes are too high—with public scrutiny, district and school accountability, and educator evaluation—not to understand the different types of assessment, the purposes to which each can be used, to understand the strengths and challenges of each approach to assessment, be able to deploy and use the assessments to improve teaching and learning, and come to value good assessment as a vital element of improved instruction.

What Is Assessment Literacy? The Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) has defined assessment literacy standards for students, teachers, building administrators, district-level administrators, and policymakers at the local and state level. For each audience, three types of assessment literacy standards have been created:

- Beliefs—What individuals should believe about student assessment, such as that assessment is a critical part of good teaching, learning about assessment takes time and a commitment to do so, why a variety of approaches to assessment is best, that it can be used to help improve learning, and so forth.
- Knowledge—What individuals should know and understand about assessment (in non-technical terms). This includes that there are different types of assessment that have different purposes, each approach has advantages and limitations, how to develop/select good assessments, how to use the assessments, and how to understand and interpret the results from them.
- Performance—What individuals should be able to become more assessment literate himself or herself, as well as how to support the assessment literacy development of their staff, students and parents in his or her district or school.

Access the complete set of assessment literacy standards through this link ([link to ALS](#)).

How Can Administrators Become More Assessment Literate? There are a variety of approaches to learning more about assessment. Some of these can be found on the MAC website (www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org), through numerous books on student assessment for practitioners written in accessible language, in programs offered by the Michigan Department of Education (e.g., the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators or FAME program), and in state and national conferences (e.g., the Michigan School Testing Conference, the CCSSO National Conference on Student Assessment, and the Assessment Training Institute).

What Are Your Next Steps? The first step to becoming assessment literate is to examine the lists of assessment literacy standards listed for building administrators and district administrators. Which knowledge standards are you confident that have you already achieved? Which performance standards have you already carried out or are able to do so? Which dispositions towards assessment can you claim?

Once you have assessed your current status, think about your current professional position. What are the assessment and accountability demands of this position (not only for yourself, but also for those who work for you?) Which standards are you missing?

Which knowledge, performance, and disposition standards are most important for you to learn or acquire?

Once you have carried out this self-assessment, carry out the same two activities for your staff. Which knowledge standards are you confident that they have already achieved? Which performance standards do you believe that they have already carried out or are able to do so? Which dispositions towards assessment can you claim that they have? Is some staff stronger or weaker in their understanding and use of assessment? How might your staff support one another in learning and using assessment more effectively?

Once you have assessed their current status, think about their current professional positions. What are the assessment and accountability demands of those positions? Which standards are they missing? Which knowledge, performance, and disposition standards are most important for you for them to learn or acquire? What strategies will you use to help your staff learn more about assessment and use it more proficiently and effectively?

The result of this self-assessment should be the start of a personal action plan for yourself, as well as the start of a professional learning plan for your staff. Using the resources listed in the previous section, begin to think about how you can access and use the available resources to address your needs and those of your staff.