



**PRINCIPLES
AND
INDICATORS
FOR
STUDENT
ASSESSMENT
SYSTEMS**

National Forum on Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

The National Forum on Assessment (Forum), a coalition of education and civil rights organizations, views high quality assessment as essential to high quality education. The Forum believes that powerful, fair assessment methods used by skilled educators are necessary for educating *all* our children to high standards.

Across the nation, assessment of student learning is undergoing profound change at the same time that reforms are taking place in standards, curriculum, instruction, school structure, the preparation and professional development of teachers, and the relationships among parents, communities, schools, governments, and business. The Forum offers these *Principles and Indicators* to help guide the development of assessment systems that can meet the needs of this changed environment.

The heart of the *Principles and Indicators* is the understanding that the primary purpose of assessment is to serve learning. The assessments supported by these *Principles* are:

- grounded in solid knowledge of how people learn;
- connected to clear statements of what is important for students to learn;
- flexible enough to meet the needs of a diverse student body; and
- able to provide students with the opportunity to actively produce work and demonstrate their learning.

Purposes of the Principles

These *Principles* are intended to help transform assessment systems and practices as part of wider school reform. Assessment should support and be integrated with changes in instruction and curriculum that improve student learning.

The *Principles* apply to assessment *systems* and call for coherence among the various assessment practices and instruments used in education. Assessment systems employ practices and methods that are consistent with learning goals, curriculum, instruction, and current knowledge of how students learn. Coherence can be achieved by ensuring that all assessments, both classroom and large-scale, support important learning and are compatible with how students learn.

- Classroom assessments are those used by teachers with their students to directly assist learning and evaluate achievement.
- Large-scale assessments are those mandated, designed, conducted, and reported from outside the classroom, usually for district or state evaluation or accountability purposes.

Classroom assessment occupies the great majority of assessment time and is the primary means through which assessment can inform instruction and learning. Therefore, the *Principles* treat transformed and strengthened classroom assessment practices as the core of the larger assessment system. Indeed, the *Principles* view assessment systems from the perspective of classrooms with a special focus on the impact of assessment on instruction and learning.

Large-scale assessments are important because of their impact on classroom practices as well as on program quality and policy decisions. Not all requirements of classroom assessments can apply directly to large-scale assessments, and vice versa. However, the essential premise of the *Principles*, that assessment practices and instruments must support improved student learning, is true for both classroom and large-scale assessments.

Large-scale assessments for accountability primarily should use sampling procedures to help evaluate and improve school programs. Accountability can be based on examinations and on classroom assessments. In using classroom assessments for accountability, various methods of evaluating and summarizing ongoing student work and assessments can be used to obtain information about the achievement of programs and groups of students.

The evaluation of a student's work done over years in school also provides the basis for certification of individual achievement, such as for high school graduation. Such high-stakes decisions should not be made on the basis of any single assessment.

In recent years, research and practice have provided a strong base for transforming classroom assessment practices. Large-scale performance assessments that can support important learning are in an earlier stage of development, but knowledge and capability in this area, from technical concepts to practice, are growing rapidly. Given the centrality of classroom assessment in these *Principles*, further research is needed to establish exactly how large-scale assessments can best support classroom assessments, while providing additional valuable information.

As a vision of and guide to change, these *Principles* serve a different purpose from that served by technical standards for assessment. It is essential that technical standards be developed and used, and that they be appropriate for the various methods and purposes of assessment. The Forum recognizes that technical requirements may vary for different levels and purposes of assessment.

Each *principle* in this document defines a broad goal; it provides context and guidance for developing or refining an important part of the overall assessment system. The *indicators* are lists of more precise statements that can be used as a checklist in evaluating or developing assessment systems and their parts.

Taken as a whole, these *Principles* reflect what the Forum believes is the best that assessment can be and do. They are, in this sense, "ideal," and the language used in the *Principles* describes what should be, not what now exists. We understand that they will not be implemented immediately or with great ease. We do firmly hold, however, that education systems must move toward meeting these assessment principles.

Uses of the Principles

The *Principles and Indicators* have multiple uses for a range of practitioners and a variety of audiences. They can be used, together with appropriate technical standards, for the general purposes of developing, refining, or evaluating student assessment systems. For example:

1. Policymakers who are developing new systems of assessment at the national, state, and district levels can use them to rethink the role of large-scale assessments and ensure support for classroom-based assessment.
2. Teachers and administrators can employ them to guide assessment reform in classrooms and schools.
3. Schools of education can use them in teacher preparation, while teachers and other educators can utilize them in their continuing professional development.
4. Community, parent, advocacy, and business organizations can use them to evaluate and help improve student assessment systems.
5. Higher education institutions can employ them in reforming their admissions and placement policies and in their own instructional and assessment practices.
6. Educational researchers can use them in designing research as well as in conducting evaluations of schools and systems.

Signing the Principles

At the end of this document is a list of organizations and individuals that have reviewed the *Principles and Indicators for Student Assessment Systems* and recommend their consideration by educators and organizations for use in evaluating, revising and developing assessment systems. Also, there is a form that additional organizations and individuals can use to add their name to the list. The Forum will regularly update the list of signers.

The Forum welcomes comments on these *Principles and Indicators*. Send the sign-on form and comments to:

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Educational Foundations for High Quality Assessment

Developing the Principles and Indicators required the Forum to define underlying beliefs and identify the essential conditions that enable high quality schooling. These form a foundation for high quality assessment systems.

The Forum agrees on the following beliefs:

- All students deserve the opportunity to learn high-level content in and across subject areas and to learn in a resource-rich, supportive environment.
- Thinking is the most basic and important skill.
- High achievement takes many forms.
- Equity demands equivalence in the standards of learning for all students and in the instructional quality offered to each student, together with the opportunity to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways.
- Family and community support is essential to student success.

The Forum views the following four conditions as necessary for schools to ensure successful learning and support the assessment practices promoted by the Principles:

1. Schools organize to support the multiple learning needs and approaches of all their members.

Schools foster a supportive environment for inquiry, intellectual challenge, and cooperation. The school climate and professional development for teachers and administrators promote respect for and inclusion of females and males from all ethnic, disability, language, socio-economic, and cultural groups. The school works toward the elimination of racism, sexism, and bias. It provides a safe environment for all students. It democratically involves all its members in shaping the school's learning and governing life, while recognizing that students require guidance in their growth to adulthood and independent learning and that students, educators, families, and support staff have different roles in assuring student success.

The school recognizes that learning is not housed in just one building. It develops collaborative external relationships so that students interact with and learn from members of the wider community, who, in turn, are welcomed by the school.

The school continually evaluates itself in order to improve. Assessment focuses on providing information used to strengthen student learning and on documenting progress. The school helps prepare educators to evaluate all students fairly. Assessments provide useful information on the particular knowledge and abilities students have or have not yet developed, in ways that will guide further learning and the improvement of curriculum and instruction.

2. Schools work to understand how learning takes place and what facilitates learning.

Learning is an intellectually active and social process shaped by the learner's experiences, perceptions, and culture. Schools provide the environment, curriculum,

and instruction to facilitate active learning by both students and educators. Educators use new knowledge on learning to improve teaching and assessment.

Because learning requires feedback and reflection, assessment is an essential component of the process. To be helpful, an assessment system uses methods that are compatible with how different students learn, provides information on how each student learns, and offers a variety of methods and opportunities for demonstrating achievement.

3. Schools establish clear statements of desired learning for all students and help all students achieve them.

Such statements are also called learning goals or content standards. They describe broad, important intellectual competencies—knowledge, skills, understandings, and habits of mind—that students should acquire and be able to demonstrate. These include important learning in and across subject areas, with a focus on thoughtful application and meaningful use of knowledge.

In order to establish general public agreement, statements of desired learning are determined through open discussion among subject-matter experts, educators, families of students, policymakers, students, and other members of the wider community, including advocacy, business, higher education, and civic organizations.

Assessment systems rely on practices and methods that are integrated conceptually with curriculum and instruction which, in turn, are based on the statements of desired learning. Schools use assessments to help students learn as well as to document and evaluate their learning.

4. All schools have equitable and adequate learning resources and classroom conditions, including capable teachers, a rich curriculum, safe and hospitable buildings, sufficient equipment and materials, and essential support services.

Taken together, these conditions provide an opportunity to learn. Class sizes are small enough that teachers are able to get to know and work closely with all their students and use active approaches to learning and assessment. Tracking and full-time, long-term placements out of the mainstream classroom generally do not occur, but if determined necessary, are periodically assessed for effectiveness. Teachers have sufficient time to plan learning and assessment activities, discuss student learning, and work with fellow teachers. They have access to adequate professional development resources.

Reports to the public on student learning include valid and coherent information on available learning resources and conditions. This is necessary in order to help evaluate any impact resources have on learning and to facilitate obtaining needed resources if they are absent. It also helps create a climate in which students are not held responsible for the absence of equitable or adequate resources.

This picture is ideal. It provides a vision of excellent education for all students to which good assessment makes a vital contribution. Assessment reform and broader school reform can and should move forward together.