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An Educator's Guide to Common Assessments

Introduction

A common assessment is any assessment given by two or more instructors with the intention of examining the results. Looking collaboratively at common assessments helps educators discuss and analyze their questions and content, form individual plans for student success, and identify opportunities to modify curriculum planning and classroom instruction.

Analyzing two different classrooms' assessment data can be like comparing apples and oranges. Let's say Mrs. Smith and Mr. Jones completed a unit on the Revolutionary War. They each wrote their own test to assess their students' understanding of the material. Mr. Jones' students scored an average of 80% on their end-of-unit assessment, while Mrs. Smith's classroom average was 73%. Upon first glance, it appears that Mr. Jones' classroom instruction provided more comprehensive content than that of his colleague.

However, were the two assessments examined for their rigor, reliability, and question stems? Did one teacher's assessment contain wordy or confusing questions? How much writing was required on each assessment, and what rubric was used to grade student work? Many factors go into comparing the reliability of assessments because their results are used in data-driven instruction for remediation and content progress.

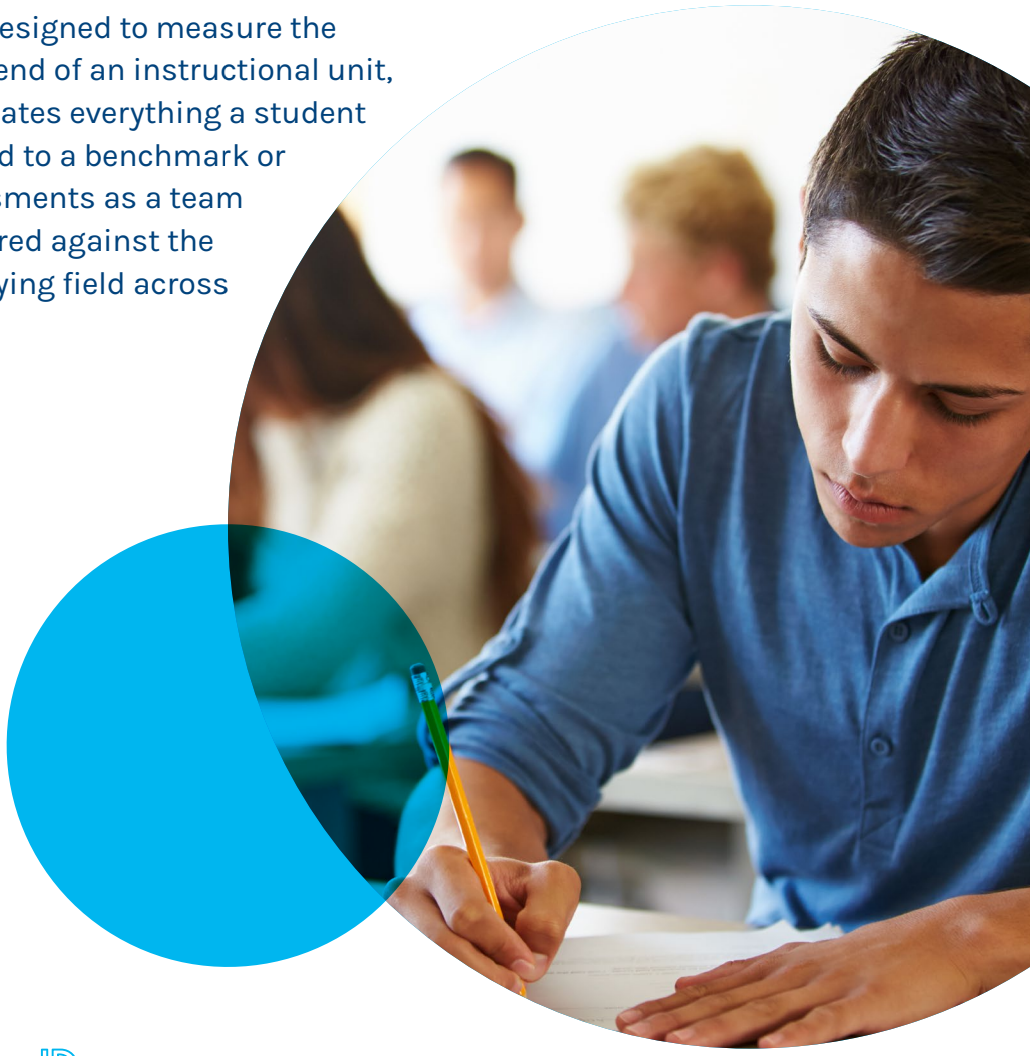
To give a more accurate "apples to apples" data comparison, many districts are moving towards common assessments. Especially after COVID-related disruptions, taking a standardized approach is more important than ever to identify unfinished learning.

Types of Common Assessments: Formative vs. Summative

A common assessment is simply a test that teachers create together and administer to all their students across multiple sections or classrooms. They are not standardized tests, but they are created and owned by the teachers. Common assessments are typically formative or summative.

Common formative assessments are designed and administered to gauge where students are relative to the standards at any given moment. Think of them as assessments for learning rather than assessments of learning—that's summative. Common formative assessments generate immediate student achievement data to monitor progress and evaluate instructional effectiveness. The immediate data they provide guides teachers who may need to shift instruction to meet the needs of their students. Formative assessments are ideal for giving students timely feedback. When these assessments are common, they also provide PLCs with critical data on all students as they progress throughout the course.

Summative assessments are designed to measure the sum of student learning. At the end of an instructional unit, a summative assessment evaluates everything a student should have mastered compared to a benchmark or standard. Creating these assessments as a team allows all students to be measured against the same standard, evening the playing field across classrooms and sections.



Examples of Formative and Summative Common Assessments

Mrs. Smith and Mr. Jones may give a quiz on the Boston Tea Party and have their students write a paragraph on the Declaration of Independence. These are formative assessments. The summative assessment may include questions about the Boston Tea Party and the Declaration of Independence, and will also test student comprehension of British taxation, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the Battle of Yorktown, covering all topics taught in the unit on the Revolutionary War.

Formative assessments generally don't take much time to administer. They can be reading comprehension questions, low-stakes quizzes and polls, a sketch of a content map, or even a journaling exercise. Summative assessments are generally bigger projects that take more time such as exams, portfolios, problem sets, and papers.

Creating assessments in advance of lesson planning is the best practice. So, whether summative or formative, ensure the teaching team agrees on what students will be responsible for mastering by the end of the unit.

Observational Assessments

Administering common formative and summative assessments is not the only way for teachers to gain insight into students' mastery of course material. An observational assessment is also a valuable tool in which educators watch their students participating in a classroom activity and record what they've seen in their assessment software solution.

For example, a teacher may circulate their classroom while their students are talking about a story in pairs. They notice that Avery can describe the general structure of the story but struggles to differentiate between character voices when reading dialogue out loud. The teacher captures this data by writing their observations into their assessment solution.

The benefits of observational assessment include watching a student in a more natural classroom environment instead of in a testing situation. Rather than using a scored assessment, teachers can add narrative data to a student's profile to create a fuller picture of their learning. The observations are also useful for adding texture to report card comments. And best of all, observational assessment data can be shared with other current and future stakeholders within the school or district—for example, the kindergarten student's 1st-grade teacher.

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Essential Questions

Along with driving PLCs, it's essential to explore the following questions when it comes to creating common assessments based on student learning targets:

1. What do we expect students to learn?

The answer to this question should be your main learning objectives—usually the Common Core standards or the standards your school follows.

2. How can we see their learning in action?

Observational assessments and common formative assessments are the best tools for getting an immediate understanding of how students are progressing in their mastery of content. This data can be used to adjust instruction in real-time and show student skills on both a classroom and individual level.

3. How will we know when they've learned it?

This is where common assessments—both formative and summative—come in. You'll know when they've learned it based on the data from such assessments. This data will be used in your exploration of the next two questions.

4. How will we respond if they don't learn it?

It's time to consider interventions, reteaching, and reassessing students. Be sure to make students part of the study of their own data, so they have ownership of their learning.

5. How will we respond if they do?

Here's the opportunity to stretch your students' capabilities with enrichment through differentiated lessons and projects.

6. How will we know if we've designed an equitable assessment?

Common assessments are designed to optimize equity by standardizing questions across class sections. They eliminate the challenge of comparing "apples to oranges" by allowing for the "apples to apples" comparison described earlier. Additionally, using accommodation profiles enhances equity by providing each student with their specific accommodation needs in each course subject in the assessment software.

Exploring these six questions as a PLC is important for creating common assessments. They keep everyone—teachers and students alike—on track with the essential standards they're responsible for mastering throughout the course.

The Benefits of Common Assessments

Common assessments provide consistency in how students are evaluated. Educators who work together to create common questions, benchmarks, question stems, and grading rubrics also look at how these assessments line up with local, state, and national standards. This is a time-consuming process for one teacher alone, but teacher collaboration within a department or grade level to create common assessments can ensure greater consistency.

Another one of the benefits of common assessments is allowing teachers to prioritize skills and standards based on the group of students they are currently teaching. This also enables departments to prioritize standards, ensuring that specific skills are hit at multiple points throughout the year if a student needs to master them for the next course.

Teacher collaboration within a department or grade level to create common assessments can ensure greater consistency.

Teacher Collaboration and Common Assessment Creation

There are many factors to consider when beginning to create a common assessment, but by following a thoughtful process (adapted here from Larry Ainsworth and Donald Viegut's Common Formative Assessments), you can ensure that collaborative common assessments will be worth your group's time.

- As a group, unpack the content or grade-level standards. Since standards have a broad range of interpretations, your group should prioritize the skills you determine need the most attention and repeated exposure.
- Identify what you want students to know and be able to do at the end of the unit. How will students demonstrate their proficiency? Will they write a formal research paper, construct a diorama, or write a play? This is also where common rubrics can be created where educators can decide what they feel is "proficient" for the assessment.
- Check for differentiation to ensure that all students can demonstrate their mastery of a skill or concept.
- Consider how long the assessment will take. Some assessments may take only one class period, while others may require a few weeks. Consult your pacing and curriculum to see if the assessment length cuts into needed instructional time.
- Ensure that the directions are clear. If students know a concept, but can't understand what's being asked on an assessment, you're not getting a true gauge of their mastery level.
- Reflect and revise after each common assessment. What did you learn about your students' achievement, where can you tailor instruction to meet needs, and how can the assessment be improved the next time it's given?

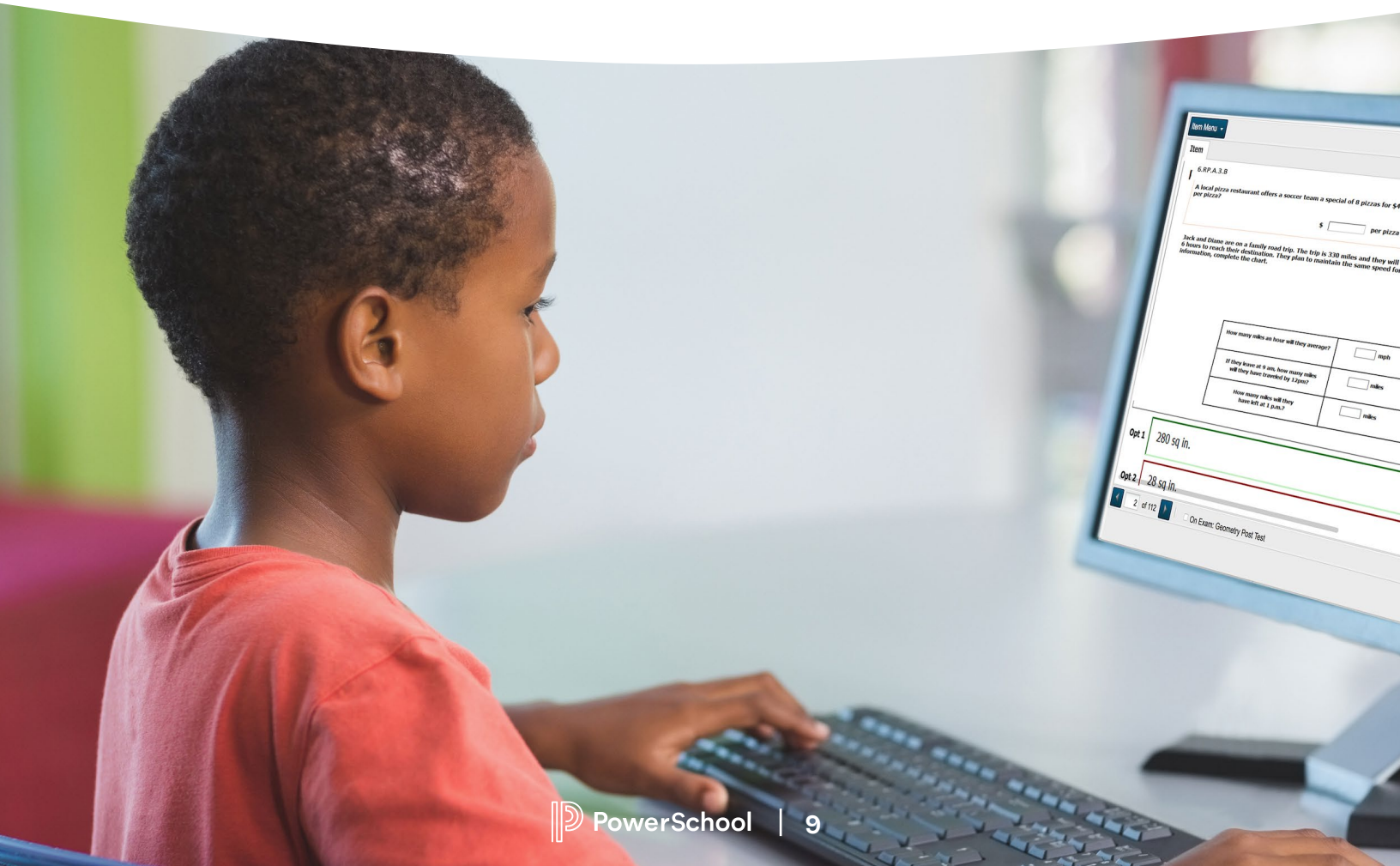
By combining the brain power of an entire grade-level team or department, you can divide and conquer the task of creating assessments, all while harnessing the great ideas and expertise of your colleagues.

The Collaboration and Common Assessment Creation Process

In Rick and Becky DuFour and Robert Eaker's article, "The Case for Common Collaborative Assessments," the authors make the argument that not only are collaborative assessments productive for students, but they are also productive for educators and encourage teacher collaboration. Teachers tend to work in isolation, often as a result of the autonomy they possess within their own classrooms.

However, the article argues that teachers should work smarter, not harder. By combining the brain power of an entire grade-level team or department, you can divide and conquer the task of creating assessments, all while harnessing the great ideas and expertise of your colleagues.

Collaborative planning provides a more equitable look at student data since teachers are comparing students' results on the exact same assessment. This does not mean that educators must teach the same way, which is often a fear of teachers who value their creative independence. However, it does mean that you can borrow and implement your team's ideas within your own classroom if they are showing student data gains that you are not.



First Time Creating a Collaborative Common Assessment?

Remember These 7 Tips

Keep these quick tips from gettingsmart.com in mind.

1. Begin with the ending. What skills or content do you want students to master?
2. Know how students will be graded. Creating rubrics is helpful here, as well as sharing the rubrics with students.
3. Consider assessments as part of your curriculum, not stand-alone statues.
4. Be on the lookout for bias. Can all students show what they know?
5. Experiment with non-traditional assessments. Plan for time in your curriculum for assessments that are not traditional exams.
6. Provide feedback. This data is critical to informing your future instruction and collaboration with your assessment group.
7. Dive in! Don't be scared to tackle the deep structures of collaborative assessments. When you utilize the knowledge and experience of your colleagues, as well as the benefits of an equal student playing field, you'll be working smarter, not harder!

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