Assessment Practices for Accelerated Learning

Introduction

When students and their teachers return to learning for the 2021-22 school year, they will be challenged by the disruptions to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prioritizing grade-level standards and focusing instructionally embedded assessments and formative assessment practices on *current* grade-level standards promises to accelerate student learning. This strategy, used during Tier 1 instruction,[1] can help schools avoid the loss of valuable time identifying what was not taught last year, and it provides the most equitable option available for Michigan's students.

Four principles guide the assessment of prioritized grade-level standards:

- Assessments should be used to determine *how* to bring students into grade-level instruction, not *whether* to bring them into it. Assessments should not be used as a gatekeeper to grade-level content.

- The formative assessment process is the strongest tool to support and accelerate learning and growth; it must be used.

- Targeted checks using instructionally embedded assessments (IEAs) will support instruction; use of diagnostic assessments, as suggested by IEAs and/or formative practices, will be helpful.

- The first weeks of school, especially, should focus on students' social, physical, and emotional well-being, strengthen relationships, and establish cultures conducive to learning.

What is Accelerated Learning?

Too often students with perceived academic gaps are put into remediation classes. Their access to grade-level content is delayed until all their academic gaps are filled. Research has shown again and again that this does not work (Rollins, 2014). Instead, learning should be accelerated. Accelerated learning keeps students moving forward on their intended grade-level trajectories by strategically preparing them for success in current grade-level content.

Acceleration prepares students for new learning combined with "just-in-time" teaching of missing key skills and concepts in the purposeful context of current lessons.

Opportunities to accelerate learning rely on robust Tier 1 instruction that includes grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for students. This robust instruction should be enhanced with supports targeted to the skills and services students need to stay on grade level.

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[1] Michigan's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a comprehensive framework comprised of a collection of research-based strategies designed to meet the individual needs and assets of the whole child.

Step One: Prioritize standards/identify essential skills.

The basic questions that guide a true professional learning community serve to support the initial work of prioritizing standards and identifying essential skills and thinking ahead about how to assess them (DuFour, et.al. (2010).

These include:

- What are students expected to learn?
- How will they know if they learned it?
- What will be the response if they do not learn it?
- What will be the response if they already know it?

In thinking about those questions, educators identify the progression of essential knowledge and skills that need to be taught and assessed in every grade-level and subject area. Then, they can prioritize the knowledge and skills students need "just in time" for an upcoming unit. From there, they can start to fill in gaps and scaffold learning for students into the unit versus trying to teach all the knowledge and skills a student may have missed in the previous grade.

There is considerable benefit derived from the collaborative work in which staff/teachers engage to prioritize standards and prepare to assess the standards and essential skills. The Michigan Assessment Consortium's (MAC) online Learning Map, **Prioritizing and Assessing Standards to Accelerate Student Learning,** provides practical guidance to engage in a process that prioritizes standards and provides examples of methods to assess students using instructionally embedded assessment.

It is important to remember that a list of prioritized standards focuses instruction and assessment but **does not remove the responsibility for teaching the other standards.** Elevating some standards to a higher status does not remove other standards; it instead relegates them to a supporting role. The POINT to prioritizing standards is to focus instruction and then align assessments.[2]

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE), with support from English language arts (ELA) and mathematics educators from across the state, has identified model essential skills for each grade-level. Distilled from the current academic standards, these skills align with the state summative assessments. These are cumulative skills in that they identify the foundational understandings that students need to have by the end of each grade-level.

The following offer additional guidance on essential skills.

- Disciplinary guidance such as the MAISA/GELN/ELTF Literacy Essential Practices
- Local or regional instructional resources and curricular materials

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[2] What Are Power Standards? And How Do I Use Them? Angela Peery, Ed. D. Retrieved from https://www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/What-do-we-mean-by-Power-Standards-by-Dr.-Angela-Peery.pdf.

Step Two: Begin with grade level instruction and assess as you go.

As the new school year begins, establish an overarching priority of positive student growth. Build relationships in the context of conveying content and practices. Nurture a supportive classroom environment focused on a growth mindset. Start students with new grade level content and move them forward based on information gleaned through the formative assessment process, with the use of an assets-based approach.[3] Work from grade-level standards and use cognitively demanding tasks and formative assessment practices to uncover student interests, assets, and needs to level the playing field and accelerate learning.

The following assessment practices, used periodically during instruction, will facilitate accelerated learning, and teachers will benefit from intentional support in using them throughout the school year.

The Pre-Assessment Process
Guskey & McTighe (2016) highlight three pre-assessment guidelines that can be applied to all types of assessment:

> **Clarify your purpose.** It is important to be explicit about the purpose for the assessment and how the data will be used and share that information with students. Explain that the purpose is to shed light on what is going to be learned in order to optimize instruction, highlight learning targets, and help students set goals.

> **Determine how the information will be used.** Actionable information is at the heart of high-quality assessment. If data from the assessment cannot be acted upon and/or if there is no plan to provide feedback to teachers and students to inform instruction and improve learning, then the assessment becomes an empty activity.

> **Use judiciously and efficiently.** Assess when it can provide information that teachers do not already have or cannot determine readily. Instructional time is extremely valuable, and any time not spent on advancing learning should be reduced or eliminated to the extent possible.

A helpful toolkit from Oakland Schools provides guidance and examples.

Formative Assessment Process

Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners (CCSSO FAST SCASS 2018).

Black and Wiliam (1998) indicate that effective formative assessment practice includes the enactment of the following steps:

- Teachers and students establish a common understanding of the task and its learning goals.
- Teachers elicit student thinking.
- Students respond to teachers' elicitation in ways that reveal their thinking.

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[3] "Asset-based teaching seeks to unlock students' potential by focusing on their talents. Also known as strengths-based teaching, this approach contrasts with the more common deficit-based style of teaching which highlights students' inadequacies." (ACRL Instruction Section 2018)

- Teachers interpret students' responses to make sense of where students are relative to the goals for student learning.
- Teachers act (e.g., trying a new strategy) to move students in the desired direction, based on their interpretation.
- Teachers re-assess to measure the action's success. Thus, formative assessment is a process, not a "thing."

Research has shown that use of formative assessment has several positive impacts. It serves to 1) improve student learning; 2) increase student involvement; 3) help teachers to be more reflective about students' understandings; and 4) support students in identifying barriers to learning. Research put into practice in Michigan is understood through Formative Assessment for MI Educators program (FAME). The components and elements of the formative assessment process are the foundation that support the development of capable learners. MDE offers sustained, job-embedded professional learning through the FAME program.

Instructionally Embedded Assessment

Instructionally embedded assessments (IEAs) are opportunities for teachers to assess student learning, within the course of a unit of study, gauge student understanding, provide feedback, determine next steps, and make instructional adjustments accordingly. They are meant to integrate classroom instruction, student learning, and assessment, and are woven into the instructional sequence. IEAs are intended to be relaxed, constant, and integrated or embedded within classroom instruction. Teachers have the flexibility to adapt IEAs to align with their priority standards and reflect the delivery of the content within their classrooms, which allows for a customized experience for each student. IEAs should give both teachers and students insights into the students' knowledge, skills, and understandings relative to the grade-level content. Due to the level of flexibility with IEAs, they can be quite developmentally and culturally appropriate for all students.

Performance Assessment

Performance assessments are designed to determine what students are able to do in relation to content standards developed at the state and local levels. These assessments measure complex sets of skills and understandings through student performance, such as conducting an investigation in science, developing a computer program to demonstrate functions in mathematics, analyzing source documents to compare and contrast different historical points of view in social studies, developing a multi-media presentation in English language arts, acting out a character in a theatrical production, or completing a painting in an arts class. The products of performance assessment can be of many types. They also typically require a checklist, a rubric, or some method for scoring students' responses to them.

There are two major types of performance assessment: events and tasks.

Performance Event – This is an on-demand performance assessment on which students are given little or no time to rehearse before performing or responding, and limited opportunities to improve their initial performance. Such assessments may take a class period or less to administer.

Performance Task – In this type of performance assessment, students have days, weeks, or months to prepare a response. The resultant work may be lengthy and comprise multiple parts, involving multiple responses of different types to multiple prompts. Embedded in the task may be written-response items, presentations, papers, student self-reflections, performances, and so forth.

Well-crafted performance assessments will help educators gauge the levels of student understanding, help the teacher to correct any student misunderstandings, and provide instruction needed to move thinking and learning forward. Additionally, the assessment process can promote deeper student learning about the assessment topic, which is one reason why using performance assessment can help drive improved student learning and higher student achievement. To see examples of performance assessments, visit maeia-artsednetwork.org

Assessing Social and Emotional Learning

Assessment practices should support the whole child and reflect the complete academic system, which includes social and emotional learning (SEL). As a result, the school's balanced assessment system should include assessments of SEL - especially as students return from an extended learning disruption. The field of SEL assessment boasts a rich and ever-growing array of free and publicly available resources and assessments designed specifically for educators and schools. Be sure to choose assessment resources from ones that have been vetted and cataloged for their psychometrics, sensitivity, and accessibility by respected sources such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The Michigan Department of Education, School Health and Safety Unit also offers assessments as part of the "Active Students Toolkit."

Interim Benchmark Assessment

By aligning all classroom assessments to essential skills drawn from the Michigan Academic Standards, teachers can have confidence that their assessments will be predictive of performance on future state summative assessments. This is also true for interim benchmark assessments, such as the SBAC interim assessments, that are based on Michigan's content standards. To the extent that the interim benchmark assessments that your district uses reflect state standards, the more useful that information will be in predicting future performance on state summative assessments.

Planning

- Identify the essential skills needed for just-in-time learning of current grade-level content.
- Design new, or use existing, pre-assessments to plan for differentiation of content.
- Use results from pre-assessments to inform instruction.
- Prioritize K-12 instructional standards for the 2020-21 school year.
- Implement instructional approaches to meet the range of student needs as they return to school in the fall.
- Identify assessment ideas that allow students to demonstrate understanding in a variety of ways.
- Assess and provide instruction in the content areas in face-to-face, virtual, and blended classroom environments.
- Incorporate well-being and SEL/trauma-informed practices into instruction.

References

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2018) 5 Things You Should Read About Asset-Based Teaching. Retrieved from https://acrl.ala.org/IS/wp-content/uploads/is-research_5Things_asset-based-teaching.pdf

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Hattie, John. (2008) Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 metanalyses relating to achievement

The Pre-Assessment Process Achieving Learning Outcomes Through Pre-Assessment Tasks and Practices (Oakland Schools 2020)

Funding

To support professional learning for staff, consider tapping Title money or school improvement funds.

Resources

Return-to-school guidance

- An introduction to Oakland Schools Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Toolkits for COVID-19 Reopening (Video resource by Oakland Schools, 2020)

- Fostering Recovery: Restoring Opportunities to Learn (Wayne RESA, 2021)

Essential skills

- Literacy Essentials (General Education Leadership Network)

Assessment resources

- Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) website offers a vast amount of resources and professional learning opportunities

- *Leading Modern Learning: A Blueprint for Vision-Driven Schools* (Second Edition), by Jay McTighe and Greg Curtis (Solution Tree, 2019)

- *Assessing Student Learning by Design: Principles and Practices for Teachers and School Leaders*, by Jay McTighe and Steve Ferrara (Teachers College Press, 2021)

- [The Pre-Assessment Process Achieving Learning Outcomes Through Pre-Assessment Tasks and Practices](#) (Oakland Schools 2020)

- [Instructionally embedded modes of assessment](#) (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2020)

- Learning Point: [Performance Assessment—What is it and why is it useful?](#) (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017)

Formative assessment process

- o Learning Point: [What do we mean by formative assessment?](#) (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017)

- o Learning Point: [Formative assessment(s) or formative assessment? The 's' makes a difference.](#) (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2021)

- o [Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators](#) (FAME) program

Assessing SEL

- o Learning Point: [How can educators assess social and emotional learning?](#) (Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2020)

- o [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)](#)

- o [Evidence-Based Practices for Assessing Students' Social and Emotional Well-being](#) (Annenberg Foundation/Brown University)