

## The Power of Common Assessments

One of the most powerful, high leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop agreed-upon knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2005a; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Reeves, 2004; Schmoker, 2003; Stiggins, 2005). Such assessments serve a distinctly different purpose than the state and provincial tests that have become the norm in North America, and we draw from the work of Rick Stiggins (2002, 2005) to clarify the differences.

State and provincial tests are summative assessment: attempts to determine if students have met intended standards by a specified deadline. They are assessments *of* learning, typically measuring many things infrequently. They can provide helpful information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of curricula and programs in a district, school, or department, and they often serve as a means of promoting institutional accountability. The infrequency of these end-of-process measurements, however, limits their effectiveness in providing the timely feedback that guides teacher practice and student learning.

Formative assessments are assessments *for* learning that measure a few things frequently. These timely in-process measurements can inform teachers individually and collectively regarding the effectiveness of their practice. Furthermore, these teacher-made assessments identify which students have learned each skill and which have not, so that those who are experiencing difficulty can be provided with additional time and support for learning. When done well, they advance and motivate, rather than merely check on student learning. The clearly defined goals and descriptive feedback to students provide them with specific insights regarding how to improve, and the growth they experience helps build their confidence as learners (Stiggins, 2002). These timely team assessments, when combined with classroom teachers' skillful ongoing assessment of student proficiency in precise skills on a daily basis, create a powerful synergy for learning.

## Providing District-Wide Grade Level Common Assessments

- **Common assessments are more efficient than assessments created by individual teachers.** If all students are expected to demonstrate the same knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to which they are assigned, it only makes sense that teachers would work together to assess student learning.
- **Common assessments are more equitable for students.** When schools *utilize* common assessments they are more likely to:
  - ◆ Ensure that students have access to the same essential curriculum
  - ◆ Use common pacing
  - ◆ Assess the quality of student work according to the same standards
- **Common assessments represent the most effective strategy for determining whether the guaranteed curriculum is being taught and, more importantly, learned.**
- **Common assessments inform the practice of individual teachers.**
- **Common assessments build a team's capacity to improve its program.** When collaborative teams of teachers have the opportunity to examine indicators of the achievement of all students in their course or grade level and track those indicators over time, they are able to identify and address problem areas in their program. Their collective analysis can lead to new curriculum, pacing, materials, and instructional strategies designed to strengthen the academic program they offer.