Sometimes, bad news can be exactly what organizations or individuals need to point them in a healthier direction.

That was the case at Thompson Middle School (Southfield, Mich.) in 2002, when the staff learned that the state had temporarily identified the school as needing “corrective action” after students failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress. About this time, the state of Michigan also began grading each individual school through its Education YES! Program. Thompson received a low C, a grade too low for the staff’s comfort.

The double dose of bad news was a jolt to the school’s culture and climate and had some faculty complaining of stress-related headaches and stomach ailments. Although the state removed the corrective action label after the school appealed, the spotlight of that status brightly illuminated a need to focus on raising student achievement and undergirded the moral impera-

**Teacher leaders hear the warning and develop common assessments to improve student achievement**

**By Robert A. Martin**

Staff embarked on a journey to align curriculum.
Staff devoted most of the school’s professional development time over two years to creating the curriculum pathway.

A CLEAR PURPOSE

To successfully use common assessments, teachers must be clear about what the state, district, and school want students to learn. Ensuring that teachers were clear about what students should learn was essential: What’s the point, after all, of cooperating to measure something if you’re measuring the wrong thing?

Teachers at Thompson said:

• “Common assessments took getting used to — but I found that I enjoy graphing data and understanding problems in learning. Sometimes they are simple, and sometimes it takes major adjustment.”

• “(Developing common assessments) forces you to work with staff members and ask, ‘What did you do well? This is hard for some teachers, but it brings out the best in the kids and adults.”

• “(Common assessment) allows more organization of what we are teaching and shifts the focus to the areas we need to improve.”

The first step in the school’s journey to develop common assessments was to ensure that the curriculum was aligned both within and across grade levels with the state’s curriculum standards. The school first had to ensure that what was taught was what was intended, or developing common assessments would be a frustrating exercise and probably have little impact on improving student learning.

Each department began with the state benchmarks and standards and the district’s grade-level expectation. The Michigan Educational Assessment Program, the state’s high-stakes test, is aligned with the Michigan Curriculum Framework, so it was vital for staff to understand, interpret, and implement aligned curriculum in the classroom.

Staff devoted most of the school’s professional development time over two years to creating the curriculum pathway. Teachers had released time for professional learning, took part in after-school work sessions, and spent portions of district-mandated professional development time working on developing and aligning the curriculum. Teachers at Thompson said:

• “Teaching your favorite way doesn’t always work so well. Sometimes you

Thompson Middle School
Southfield, Mich.

Grades: 6-8
Enrollment: 630
Staff: 47 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 5%
Black: 89%
Hispanic: 2%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 0%
Native American: 2%
Other: 2%

Limited English proficient: 5%
Languages spoken: 2
Free/reduced lunch: 40%
Special education: 13%

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have this wonderful lesson that you love, but they aren’t learning. You have to change.”

- “Common assessments allow teachers to focus on what is good for Thompson. We address local learning issues and then move to state and national.”
- “Teachers need to understand (common assessments) do not grade the teacher. It doesn’t mean you have failed — it means you must change.”

When Thompson had completed this process, staff were ready to begin developing common assessments. This step-by-step process was accomplished by devoting one week to each step during each quarter. That enabled teachers to complete two common assessment periods during each semester. The focus also shifted from class averages to individual student data analysis.

**Step 1.** Refine common lesson plans. Teachers design smaller and more frequent assessments looking at the student level and provide reteaching or interventions to meet students’ individual needs.

**Step 2.** Develop/refine rubrics. Discuss and share rubric with same-subject team for feedback. Each team is charged with developing its own rubric to guide teachers’ evaluation of student responses on the assessment.

English teachers, in particular, may want to use alternative forms of assessments, such as book reports, rather than just pencil-and-paper tests. That is fine as long as teachers create a common rubric to guide their evaluation.

**Step 3.** Share assignments in teaching in mastery. Practice concepts with students to be assessed. Agree on assessment and on the final draft of the rubric.

**Step 4.** Administer the assessment. Involve same-subject partner in external scoring by using the common rubric. This is a goal and not mandatory. Complete a data analysis for classes by calculating percentages of students who master and do not yet master the concept. Complete data analysis for individual students.

**Step 5.** Compare student work. Collaborate and agree on corrective teaching strategies. Implement corrective teaching strategies. Teach targeted interventions for individual students. Team members work together to identify the strategies teachers believe will be most effective in assisting students who do not master the concept.

To prepare for the second cycle of common assessments, teachers continue the pattern with some revisions.

**Step 6.** Revisit and refine lesson plans. Design assessments. Design and refine rubrics.

**Step 7.** Practice rubrics with a same-subject partner. Discuss and share the rubric with the interdisciplinary team for feedback.

**Step 8.** Share assignments in teaching to mastery. Practice concepts with those students to be assessed. Refine common assessment #2 in January and #4 in May.

**Step 9.** Administer the common assessment. Complete a data analysis for classes by calculating the percentage of students mastering and not mastering the concept. Complete a data analysis for individual students.

**Step 10.** Collaborate and agree on corrective teaching strategies. Implement corrective teaching strategies. Teach targeted interventions to individual students.

Each step represents one week in the 10-week marking period. Weeks six through 10 basically repeat steps one through five.

Throughout the process, teachers experienced anxiety, challenges, and victories. Teachers were stressed but found satisfaction in their new depths of collaboration and improved student achievement. In 2005,

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**Resources**

These books are resources for schools beginning to implement common assessments:


Thompson received a solid B on the state’s report card. Thompson’s achievement scores have improved and are a testimony to the results of teacher focus, collaboration, and collective wisdom.