



GEORGIA DISTRICT ADDS ASSESSMENTS AND TRANSFORMS CLASSROOM PRACTICE

BY LISSA PIJANOWSKI

Forsyth County Schools has recently finished a very successful year. In 2008, all 16 elementary schools and eight middle schools made Adequate Yearly Progress. In spite of the fact that Georgia administered new, more rigorous math assessments for grades 3-5 and grade 8, the district had an average of 22% more students passing the assessments than the state average. To what does this district attribute its success? Leaders and teachers believe that a new, intense focus on benchmark assessments combined with focused, collegial conversations contributed to this impressive growth.

Forsyth County Schools, located 35 miles north of Atlanta, has designed a balanced assessment program that emphasizes classroom assessment and organizes data and resources to foster collegial conversations focused on standards and learning. The district's focus on assessment began five years ago through a professional learning program called Focused Choice offering all staff in the 32,000-student district six early release days and two full staff develop-

ment days for learning content that supports standards-based classrooms. One of the learning opportunities, Assessment FOR Learning (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006), was designed to emphasize formative over summative assessment to provide timely and effective feedback to students (Marzano, 2003) and inform classroom practice. The professional learning not only transformed classroom practice, but also drove the district to make significant changes in how school leaders and teachers used assessment data.

For this district, balanced assessment does not mean that summative and formative measures are weighted equally. Forsyth County Schools creates a system that gives formative,

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Five assessment measures

Standardized assessment	Benchmark assessment	Common assessment	Classroom assessment	Progress monitoring
PURPOSE: A standardized test is designed to measure the amount of knowledge and skill a student has acquired and produces a statistical profile used as a measurement to evaluate student performance in comparison with a standard or norm.	PURPOSE: A benchmark assessment is designed as a measurement of group performance against an established set of standards at defined points along the path toward standard attainment, typically administered every nine weeks.	PURPOSE: A common assessment is collaboratively developed by grade-level teams or departments as a measurement of group or individual performance against an established set of standards.	PURPOSE: Classroom assessment refers to all assessment activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged.	PURPOSE: Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used to monitor academic growth of an individual student or an entire class based on predetermined learning goals. The effectiveness of instruction and intervention is also evaluated.
DESIGNED BY: Georgia Department of Education and national assessment vendors.	DESIGNED BY: Forsyth County Schools and state and national item banks.	DESIGNED BY: Collaborative teacher teams/departments.	DESIGNED BY: Classroom teachers.	DESIGNED BY: Classroom teachers and national assessment vendors.
INSTRUCTIONAL DATA: Standardized tests can provide information on individual or group performance to help educators identify instructional needs, measure growth over time, evaluate effectiveness of programs, and monitor schools for educational accountability. Standardized tests are used at the national, state, system, school, and classroom level.	INSTRUCTIONAL DATA: Benchmark assessment results can be used to determine student growth and student performance relative to grade-level and/or course achievement expectations. Results can guide classroom instruction and identify individual student needs for reteaching, intervention, and/or acceleration. In addition, benchmark assessments provide periodic evaluation of program effectiveness and guide professional development efforts. Benchmark assessments are used at the system, school, and classroom level.	INSTRUCTIONAL DATA: Common assessments can provide teacher teams with data to determine student performance relative to learning goals identified in a unit of study. Results can be analyzed to guide classroom instruction and identify individual student needs for reteaching, intervention, and/or acceleration. Shared results foster collaboration to improve instruction and embedded professional learning. Common assessments are used at the school and classroom level.	INSTRUCTIONAL DATA: Formative assessment evidence is diagnostic and used to adapt the teaching to meet the needs of students. Results can be used to guide instruction and identify individual student needs for reteaching, intervention and/or acceleration. Students and teachers can use self-assessment to determine levels of achievement, set goals, and identify strategies to meet those goals. Classroom assessments are used at the classroom and student level.	INSTRUCTIONAL DATA: Progress monitoring data demonstrates a student's progression of achievement and informs how instructional techniques need to be adjusted to meet the individual student's learning needs. Results can guide decisions on reteaching, intervention, and/or acceleration. Progress monitoring tools are used at the school, classroom, and student level.

classroom assessment much more weight than standardized assessments. The chart above reflects five different assessment components in the district's balanced assessment program.

Standardized tests are just one component; the other four are classroom assessment measures designed to give formative data on student progress against standards.

THE POWER OF BENCHMARKING

Benchmark assessments are one of the most recent additions to the assessment program. The district recognized that teacher leaders should

develop benchmark assessments for reading/English language arts and mathematics using consistent standards-based pacing guides. The district provided teachers guidance and instruction on how to choose items aligned to standards. Teachers became quality assessors through this process by considering item attributes such as Lexile range for reading passages and Bloom's Taxonomy level when critically choosing items to include on each assessment. With all classrooms in grades 3-8 using the assessments three times a year, the data have fostered rich dialogue not only within buildings among teams, but across the district. However, collegial conversations around using assessment evidence do not come naturally. School leaders need well-designed professional learning and relevant, timely data to frame the dialogue to transform classroom practice.

The district created school teams that included an administrator, teacher leaders, and the instructional technology specialist to engage in ongoing learning on using data reports and leading meaningful conversations. The professional learning design included training on how to access different types of reports providing student, classroom, and test item detail through Edusoft, Riverside's assessment management system. The district also published districtwide and school-level reports to highlight the standards across the district that posed the greatest challenge to students. The use of Edusoft to support formative assessment has provided classroom teachers the ability to create performance-based assessments, align assessments to standards, scan answer documents, and review results in a matter of minutes. The district leverages Edusoft for benchmark assessments as well to provide teachers with timely, meaningful reports.

Once teams were adept at access-

Forsyth County Schools Cumming, Ga.

Number of schools: 30 (16 elementary, 8 middle, 4 high, 1 nontraditional charter, 1 alternative)

Enrollment: 32,000

Staff: 3,500

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	83%
Black:	2%
Hispanic:	9%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	4%
Native American:	0%
Other:	2%

Limited English proficient: 5%

Languages spoken: 29

Free/reduced lunch: 14%

Special education: 16%

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ing the data, the learning moved toward facilitating the conversations. The district modeled facilitation of collegial conversations for school team members at each session and provided sample questions, organizers, and reflection tools so that each team could design conversations that worked for their staff. School and district leaders engaged the staff in three levels of reflection and dialogue to develop a rich understanding of what the data were telling them about instructional practice and student performance.

LEVEL 1

The first level was *individual teacher reflection*. Teachers used their class reports and item analysis to reflect on the following standards-based questions:

- Which items did students miss most frequently?
- What standard was each item aligned to?
- What was the school performance compared to your class performance on that item?
- Why do you think most of your students chose the responses they chose?

- What will you do now to reteach the standard?
- Which individual students require additional remediation and intervention based on these results?

These questions lead teachers to delve deeply into the standards they teach and to reflect on their instructional practice in a low-risk environment. Teacher understanding of their own performance data must precede conversations within a professional learning community. School leaders and teacher leaders provided support for teachers by asking coaching questions to ensure they had reached a deep level of individual understanding before engaging in team conversations.

LEVEL 2

The second level of reflection and dialogue was *grade-level/content-team conversation*. With individual reflections in hand, teachers participated in a grade-level/content-team meeting to determine overall strengths and challenges, discussing the following questions:

- What are our grade-level/content-team strengths based on the results?
- What are our team challenges based on the results?
- What factors in our curriculum and instruction do we feel influenced these results?
- How can we collaborate to reteach standards that are hardest to learn?
- How will we know if our students have mastered the standard?
- What remediation and intervention will be most effective for individual students with low performance?
- Is there additional professional

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learning support that we need as a team to help us achieve our goals for student learning?

The purpose of the grade-level/content-team sessions is to identify standards that were most problematic and determine how the team can collaborate to reteach and reassess. The conversations in these sessions lead teachers to better understand the standards, brainstorm ideas for modifying instruction, and collaborate on a plan of action for remediation and intervention before the next assessment (Schmoker, 1999). The team sessions continued the learning of the individual teacher reflections. Teachers analyzed their results even more intensely and took actions they may not have otherwise considered in isolation.

LEVEL 3

The third level of reflection and dialogue was *schoolwide dialogue about the results*. Building leaders facilitated conversations about the benchmark assessments and how the results of these assessments, along with other assessment data, could influence the school improvement process.

The benchmark assessments were incorporated into all school improvement plans as evidence of student learning to be monitored throughout the year. The data from the benchmarks allowed leaders to ask the following questions of their teaching and support staff:

- Do the results show we are making progress toward meeting our school improvement goals?
- Of the reading/English language arts and math target areas we identified for improvement this year, how did we perform?
- How did our subgroups and at-risk students perform?
- Are there strategies and actions in

our school improvement plan that need to be modified based on these results?

- Are the remediation and interventions offered to our students adequate for closing the achievement gap?
- Do we need to modify our professional learning plan to provide additional support?
- What resources do you need to accomplish the curriculum and instructional changes you have identified?

This schoolwide dialogue enables school leadership to monitor the curriculum and instruction in the building as well as progress toward school improvement goals (Reeves, 2006).

The benchmark assessments have been a critical element of how Forsyth County Schools uses formative assessment data to impact classroom practice. The district's belief in the power of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998) has guided the work of teachers as they review student work on a monthly, weekly, and daily basis through observations, portfolios, and conversations to make real-time decisions about instruction.

Additionally, the benchmark assessments have enabled school and district leadership to monitor student progress toward standards using a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Marzano, 2003), and lead conversations that help triangulate all assessment components to provide timely feedback, remediation, and intervention.

Through implementation of the benchmark assessments as part of the balanced assessment program, the district has learned the following lessons:

- Teacher leaders must be involved in every facet of the project from developing pacing guides, to aligning assessment items, to organizing results.
- Purposeful professional learning opportunities must be designed to

scaffold staff learning at all levels of the organization.

- District and school leaders must acknowledge that changes in curriculum and assessment to influence instruction can be uncomfortable for staff and must make modifications along the way to accommodate readiness levels.

Based on the results for students, the district plans to expand the use of the Edusoft assessment management system in 2008-09 to the high school level to support classroom assessment and benchmark assessments in high-stakes courses. Leaders and teachers in Forsyth County Schools believe benchmark assessments played a big role in the growth the district experienced after only one year. They have learned this lesson well: Never underestimate the power of timely, standards-based data and focused, collegial conversations led by knowledgeable leadership to impact changes in professional practice and, ultimately, improvements in student achievement.

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Team sessions continued the learning of the individual teacher reflections.