

Inside

- Help teachers prepare for common assessments, pp. 5-6
- 4 ways to say goodbye, p. 7
- Coach uses questions, p. 9

May 2011

Vol. 6, No. 8

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Not just another test

COMMON CORE STANDARDS ASSESSMENTS BRING UNCOMMON OPPORTUNITY



By Anthony Armstrong

According to *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* (2010a), almost 90% of teachers reported that their schools have “clearly defined and set specific standards for what constitutes college and career readiness for students” (p. 19). However, a report released in 2010 by ACT revealed that 34% of the high school graduates taking the ACT did not meet the benchmarks for college readiness in English, and 57% did not meet the benchmarks for math (p. 8), indicating a gap between schools’ standards and students’ readiness for college.

Some observers argue that this gap is caused by the need for modern students to learn 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and self-motivation, to succeed beyond high school. Others argue that these skills have always been taught in school but have been devalued and overlooked because of the inability to measure such skills

through standardized testing.

To address this gap, state education leaders established the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and math to help ensure that all students consistently graduate with the knowledge and skills needed for college and career success.

What constitutes college and career readiness for today’s students? Teachers and business leaders recently rated higher-order skills like problem solving, critical thinking, and persuasive writing as more important than higher-level content knowledge in mathematics and science (MetLife, 2010a). Educators have long known that current standardized tests cannot accurately measure these skills, and it was this need for more authentic tests that led to the formation of two different consortia of states in 2010. The consortia, funded by federal grants, are currently working collaboratively with education leaders and teachers to create more authentic assessments aligned to the CCSS.

The two consortia, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), approach the common assessments in different ways; however, they both share a goal of creating assessment systems that use multiple tools and supports that can be used throughout the year to

Continued on p. 2

This newsletter was made possible with support from MetLife Foundation.

**MetLife
Foundation**



Teaching 2030

Twelve accomplished classroom educators and a leading advocate for a 21st-century teaching profession, supported by MetLife Foundation, identify four emergent realities that will shape the learning experiences of children born in the new millennium and propose six levers of change that can help ensure that all students have access to excellent teaching.

Teaching 2030, Teachers College Press 2011, available at www.Teaching2030.org

View a four-minute video illustrating the book's major themes: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk-aulXHymQ

Continued from p. 1

improve student readiness, inform and support high quality teaching, and deliver web-based and face-to-face professional development. Both consortia plan to build extensive digital libraries containing model instructional units, formative assessments, and professional learning resources that will be available for use, but not required (Center for K–12 Assessment & Performance Management at ETS, 2011).

Whether or not the new common assessment systems and the accompanying tools and resources will be the missing infrastructure that educators are seeking remains to be seen; however, coaches and teacher leaders will need to establish open, honest, and continuous communication with their colleagues to help everyone reach a higher level of understanding about what the assessments are — and are not — in order to make a meaningful determination of their value to student learning.

The modernization of student assessments

The mere mention of common assessments can draw the ire of teachers, parents, and school leaders who sometimes associate them with traditional standardized tests. These tests are known to be limited and unable to measure important intangible skills, such as research practices, critical thinking, problem solving, etc. More than six out of 10 teachers surveyed agree that better tools are needed to understand student strengths and needs, and that access to online and technological resources that “personalize educa-

tion to the learning profiles of students” will have a major impact in helping teachers meet the needs of diverse learners (MetLife, 2010b, p. 12).

Thanks to the recent and rapid improvements in the assessment field, student testing is evolving to help teachers better meet the differentiated needs of a diverse student population, thus providing teachers with tools that have been unavailable to them previously. In the book *Teaching 2030*, Barnett Berry and 12 accomplished teachers look ahead 20 years at the most promising possibilities for the evolution of the American education system. The co-authors note that current advances in technology and brain science are already creating advances in assessments that will help education scholars “make instruction smarter and more tailored than ever before” (Berry et al., 2010, p. 39).

What would these new, more accurate assessments look like if they are going to meet students’ needs? Cheryl Krehbiel (2009), school improvement program advisor with Washington, D.C.-based B&D Consulting, said that future assessment systems can help inform instruction by including “a significant investment in high-quality selected-response and constructed-response assessment items for both formative and summative use” (p. 3).

The common assessments currently in development by PARCC and SBAC are building upon these visions for the future of assessments. Their efforts represent an unprecedented opportunity for schools to join together, pool their financial resources, and harness the power of technology and advancements in testing science to develop and implement high-quality assessments that more accurately and equitably measure student skills and knowledge.

While technology and learning studies have dramatically changed the quality of assessments that are possible, PARCC and SBAC have no plans to reinvent the curricu-

This newsletter was made possible with support of MetLife Foundation. Learning Forward is solely responsible for its content and is not affiliated with MetLife Foundation or MetLife.

Investments

“States and districts must invest in serious professional preparation (in meaningful pre-and in-service programs) that prepares teachers specifically as expert leaders in assessment and evaluation, and give them the time and tools they need to execute that leadership ... If policymakers can begin to develop ways for teachers to own the standards and assessments and offer time and training for implementation with fidelity and rigor, then classroom practitioners will not only embrace 21st century school reforms, they will help lead them.”

— Barnett Berry

Source: Berry, B., & Daughtrey, A. (2010). *New student assessments and advancing teaching as a results-oriented profession: A white paper developed for the Race to the Top assessment consortia*. Washington, D.C.: Arabella Advisors.

Continued on p. 3

KEY SKILLS

The five most important skills listed by teachers for college and career readiness require higher-order assessments that cannot be measured with traditional content knowledge testing.

Problem-solving skills	64%		34%		98%
Critical thinking skills	64%		33%		97%
Ability to write clearly and persuasively	53%		43%		96%
Ability to work independently	55%		40%		95%
Ability to work in teams	42%		44%		86%
Knowledge of other nations, cultures, international issues	19%	44%		63%	
Knowledge and ability in higher-level science	11%	39%		50%	
Knowledge and ability in higher-level mathematics	11%	35%		46%	

Source: MetLife. (2010a). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers*. New York: Author.

Continued from p. 2

lum wheel. Both consortia will leave curriculum planning up to individual states or districts, according to state policy — but will provide supporting materials for those who would like assistance and resources to help model and guide curriculum. Large groups of teachers and education leaders from each state will help the consortia collect a massive library of high-quality learning materials that will include curriculum models, lesson plans, released test items, performance tasks, and formative and practice assessments. In addition to helping guide instruction, these libraries of resources will ensure that teachers and students know exactly what to expect from the assessments — unlike today's standardized tests where teachers often feel left in the dark regarding what will actually be on the test.

Considerations for teacher professional development

The promise of more authentic assessments that can help inform instruction and more accurately measure learning, while noble, leaves many teachers rightly concerned about moving theory into practice on such a large scale. Addressing these concerns will be critical for a smooth and successful implementation of the common standards and assessments.

Marsha Ratzel, a teacher at Leawood Middle School in Leawood, Kansas, and contributor to *Teaching 2030*, shared

her concerns about an over-reliance on technology for assessments. “It takes a master to blend knowledge of the content, select and apply the best instructional strategies for that content, and then best match the assessment types to the kind of learning and the students. It’s why I don’t think a computer is the best at doing all this nuanced balancing of factors.”

Ratzel emphasized the importance of the complex and delicate interactions of human relationships. “It’s the human side of the equation that will make the difference. It’s how all those tools are deployed, presented to the kids, worked with every day. It’s the interaction between teachers and students that will make the difference in learning gains. Not the computers or the tests or the machines.”

Another concern for many educators is how the assessments will be scored. While the consortia are developing sophisticated computer-scoring systems, including using artificial intelligence systems, the question of human versus computer scoring has merit — computer-based grading will help teachers see results faster, while human scoring will help with analysis of complex tasks and the consideration of student and testing context.

While the consortia will provide materials to address these and other concerns, building teacher confidence in common assessments will continue to be an ongoing challenge for coaches and teacher leaders, but can be overcome through continuous and honest communication.

Continued on p. 4

Impact of resources on student learning needs

Teachers in schools with more than two-thirds students who are low-income are more likely than those with one-third or fewer low-income students to say that better tools to understand student strengths and needs and “access to online and technology resources to personalize education to the learning profiles of students” will have a major impact in helping teachers meet the needs of diverse learners.

	Total teachers	% low-income students			% minority students		
		0-33%	34-66%	67% or more	0-33%	34-66%	67% or more
ACCESS TO ONLINE AND TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES TO PERSONALIZE EDUCATION TO LEARNING PROFILES OF STUDENTS							
Major impact	64%	59%	60%	72%	59%	67%	70%
Minor impact	31%	36%	33%	25%	36%	28%	27%
No impact at all	4%	4%	5%	4%	5%	5%	3%
BETTER TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' LEARNING STRENGTHS AND NEEDS							
Major impact	63%	56%	62%	70%	55%	66%	71%
Minor impact	33%	39%	33%	27%	39%	29%	26%
No impact at all	3%	3%	4%	3%	4%	4%	2%

Source: MetLife. (2010b). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers*. New York: Author.

Continued from p. 3

Next steps

Full implementation of the common assessments is currently planned for the 2014-15 school year, with both consortia to begin piloting and testing various components of their systems starting this year. Coaches and teacher leaders can take advantage of the time they have now by

creating or strengthening a culture of understanding and ownership of the new common standards and assessments. Continue to look for ways to engage teachers with

the standards and assessments that demonstrate the direct benefit to student learning. Most importantly, give teachers plenty of time to adjust to a new way of thinking about assessments.

Copies of current and previous reports in the annual *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* series are available at www.metlife.com/teachersurvey

References

Center for K-12 Assessment & Performance Man-

agement at ETS. (2011, February). *Coming together to raise achievement: New assessments for the common core state standards*. Austin, Texas: Author

Krehbiel, C. (2009, December). *Comments on papers presented by Margaret Heritage and Lauren Resnick: Recommendations for high-quality instructional assessment systems*. Princeton, N.J.: Center for K-12 Assessment and Performance Management at ETS.

MetLife. (2010a). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers, Part 1: Clearing the path*. New York: Author.

MetLife. (2010b). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers, Part 2: Teaching diverse learners*. New York: Author.

•
Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor of Learning Forward. 

Read more about the Common Core State Standards assessment systems

SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)
www.k12.wa.us/smarter/

Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
<http://PARCOnline.org>

Alliance for Excellent Education webinar on findings from the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher
<http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-mar-25>

Center for K-12 Assessment & Performance Management at ETS
www.k12center.org/