



To improve assessment, Georgia district turns to teachers

BY AMANDA D. LYNCH

Educators everywhere are responding to the realities of student learning loss, unfinished learning, or disrupted learning as we continue to experience the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even two years later, studies are

documenting lasting drops in students' academic achievement in reading and math since the onset of the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Moreover, we know students of color and students attending high-poverty schools experienced the largest achievement declines, increasing pre-

existing gaps for already marginalized students (Lewis et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2021). Teachers and leaders are working to maximize instructional time to ensure students are able to rebound academically, while grappling with staffing shortages, mental health concerns, increased disruptive

Designing and using assessments requires a set of skills that educators can develop with intentional professional learning and support.

behaviors, absenteeism, and other pandemic-influenced realities.

Large-scale assessments can do more than document the learning gaps resulting from the pandemic. They can also be a vital tool to help reduce these gaps. Assessment should inform educators about student needs, drive strategies to address them, and ground professional learning about using those strategies to advance student learning, as indicated in Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). When done well, assessment is well-aligned with curriculum and instruction and helps inform teaching and learning by pinpointing what standards students have or have not mastered.

Designing and using assessments requires a set of skills that educators can develop with intentional professional learning and support. In Fulton County Schools, Georgia, we recognize the need for this support as part of a districtwide effort to advance an assessment strategy that honors instructional time and is useful for teachers and beneficial for students. A core component of this effort is our assessment leaders cohort, a group of teacher leaders who are developing the assessments, supported by job-embedded professional learning on assessment development, unit planning, data analysis and action, and leadership skills.

While the assessment leaders cohort was in place before this initiative, we were able to reimagine its purpose and outcomes. Previously, principal-selected teachers would attend assessment-focused workshops four times throughout the year. Now, by aligning their professional learning to the larger district assessment strategy, we are able to restructure our professional learning to be relevant, ongoing, job-embedded, and linked to our larger district improvement goals around student achievement. This approach benefits participating teacher leaders and, ultimately, the district as a whole.

DISTRICT UNIT ASSESSMENTS

Fulton County Schools is a large, diverse, urban district in Georgia that serves nearly 90,000 students in 106 schools. Enhanced assessment is one of our strategies for pandemic recovery. This initiative includes creating unit assessments in the areas of English language arts at grades 3-8 and 11 and mathematics at grades K-8 and Algebra 1.

Creating our own district assessments allows us to align their content to district curriculum maps and prioritized standards, assessing standards that are taught in each unit. Units vary in length by grade and content, but most courses have between five and eight assessments over an

academic year. These unit assessments, which are used in all schools throughout the district, are intended to:

- Provide a measure of how well students are progressing toward mastery of standards that have been taught;
- Inform teaching and learning efforts as teachers and professional learning communities (PLCs) use results, including item analysis, to plan reteaching or enrichment opportunities;
- Serve as a planning tool for teachers as they engage in initial unit planning in their PLCs by providing items that align to the content and rigor of the standards; and
- Encourage teachers to maintain appropriate pacing by assessing standards that are indicated on the district scope and sequence and curriculum maps.

For unit assessments to be successful teaching and learning tools, we needed to ensure their purpose was clear and that they were high quality. It was also vital that they would generate useful data. We had to make sure that resources and support were in place for both data analysis and instructional planning.

It was a large lift, and to fulfill it, we turned to teachers. Specifically, we

IDEAS

realized our assessment leaders cohort could support assessment development and training around district unit assessments if we engaged them in effective professional learning focused on assessment and leadership skills. This required the change from less effective and more general professional learning on assessment to our more purpose-driven, job-embedded work.

REIMAGINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Recognizing the importance of ensuring assessment leaders cohort members' knowledge of and alignment to the district goals and best practices in assessment, we took this opportunity to reimagine the structure, purpose, and content of the professional learning for this cohort.

The program is led by a team of district assessment program specialists, who support district and school-based staff in the implementation of effective assessment practices, similar to how a central office content specialist would provide support and direction to schools within a particular content area, such as English language arts or math.

First, we shifted how teachers became members of the assessment leaders cohort. We moved from a principal-identification process to an application process that also required a principal recommendation. This helped ensure we were engaging teacher leaders who were interested in assessment work and serving as PLC leads.

Our initial cohort with this new application process resulted in the acceptance of 76 teachers. They represented all levels — elementary, middle, and high — as well as each of the geographically diverse learning zones across our large, urban district.

Second, we more clearly defined the purpose for members of the assessment leaders cohort. Participants would gain knowledge and skills on both the assessment and leadership content we defined, but they would do so through supporting district unit assessment creation and implementation. This

By investing in professional learning, we increased teacher capacity to develop, select, use, and learn from assessment, while generating context-specific assessments that are used districtwide.

provided relevant experience that could then be transferred to the work of their PLCs as they created other assessment opportunities, such as common formative assessments or daily exit tickets.

Finally, we restructured the professional learning content for this cohort. Previously, the learning focused on formative instructional practices. We revised the content to also include assessment development, unit planning, and data analysis and action. At the same time, we approached the content through more relevant, experiential learning than in the past.

We also included an intentional focus on developing cohort members' leadership skills so they might feel better prepared to lead assessment work in their PLCs at their school. Cohort members were expected to bring the assessment practices from their professional learning to their own PLCs and received coaching and feedback from the assessment program specialists.

Ultimately, the professional learning we designed for our newest assessment leaders took place over a year and a half. This began with four paid days in the summer focused on item alignment and assessment design. Assessment leaders cohort members practiced reviewing and evaluating test items for quality from existing items, item banks we owned, and state assessment guides.

Next, they learned about assessment design and then made decisions in their collaborative teams about the number and types of items to include for each standard.

Throughout the process, assessment program specialists supported teacher

leaders so they could receive ongoing feedback about their work.

The work of the assessment leaders cohort yielded the first round of our unit assessments. These were then reviewed by content directors. Success in the item alignment and review training qualified these teachers to be hired outside of school hours to support the development of additional unit assessments following the same process.

In addition, cohort members developed the skills to support the assessment work in their buildings. Throughout the school year, assessment program specialists offered professional learning on initial unit planning protocols using the unit assessment, as well as data analysis and action protocols on the data the assessment generated.

Assessment leaders cohort members were encouraged to facilitate this same learning in their PLCs. We further supported cohort members to effectively lead the assessment work in the PLC by identifying challenges to implementation and providing specific strategies to overcome these challenges.

Importantly, our assessment program specialists offered feedback and support throughout this process. For example, they would offer to help plan for or observe and provide feedback on PLC meetings that the assessment leadership cohort members led focused on assessment practices.

EVERYONE BENEFITS

The success our district has had with implementing the new assessment strategy can largely be attributed, we believe, to the professional learning for teacher leaders. By investing in professional learning, we increased teacher capacity to develop, select, use, and learn from assessment, while generating context-specific assessments that are used districtwide.

This experience directly countered the message we often hear in schools that there is not time for professional learning. As instructional time becomes even more sacred post-

pandemic, we believe we don't have time not to build teachers' capacity.

For the district, the professional learning made the unit assessment development possible and the use of the assessments effective. The scope of the project was not possible without the support of teachers, and the support of the teachers would not have been possible without the learning.

Furthermore, the involvement and engagement of the teachers increased ownership and buy-in among educators at all levels. Having teachers promoting the quality and benefit of unit assessments helped create buy-in at the teacher and school level throughout our large district in a way that would not have been possible without them.

As a result, district unit assessment participation rates exceeded 80% at most schools. The teacher leaders' knowledge and capacity also helped make sure the PLCs applied the assessments effectively. PLCs used the assessments to help plan effective instruction at the rigor of the standard, and, after administering them to students, they analyzed data, identified student misconceptions, and planned for reteaching.

For teacher leaders in the assessment leadership cohort, there were multiple benefits.

Contributing to the creation of assessments that would be used districtwide provided cohort members an important sense of purpose. Not only would the assessments be highly visible, the cohort members themselves would be among the teachers administering the assessments, so they

The scope of the project was not possible without the support of teachers, and the support of the teachers would not have been possible without the learning.

were driven to create a high-quality product that would positively impact teaching and learning.

Engaging in professional learning also provided cohort members with practical skills that were relevant to their regular work. Because effective assessment involves more than unit assessments, our teachers were able to apply their knowledge and skills to other assessment types, such as common formative assessments, exit tickets, quick checks, etc. These skills were practical for their regular instruction.

Assessment leaders also benefited from their involvement and advocacy for the unit assessments. As part of their professional learning, we intentionally practiced leadership skills with them. We identified challenges they might face when leading colleagues in their building and strategized ways to overcome them. By contributing to their leadership development, assessment leadership cohort members are also gaining experience that can help them in future roles or leadership opportunities.

Our experience shows how an intentional effort to align professional learning with districtwide goals and initiatives is a win-win situation for

everyone involved. We believe the lessons we learned can be applied to many other initiatives, in our district and beyond, and we're convinced the investment is worthwhile.

REFERENCES

Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021). *COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery.* McKinsey & Company. www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-an-emerging-k-shaped-recovery

Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Lewis, K., & Morton, E. (2022). *The pandemic has had devastating impacts on learning. What will it take to help students catch up?* The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/03/03/the-pandemic-has-had-devastating-impacts-on-learning-what-will-it-take-to-help-students-catch-up/

Learning Forward. (2022). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Author.

Lewis, K., Kuhfeld, M., Ruzek, E., & McEachin, A. (2021). *Learning during COVID-19: Reading and math achievement in the 2020-21 school year.* NWEA. www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/07/Learning-during-COVID-19-Reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year.research-brief-1.pdf

Amanda D. Lynch (amanda.lynch@csdecaur.net) is chief of staff in City Schools of Decatur and a former assessment coordinator in Fulton County Schools in Georgia. ■



LEARNING FORWARD
FOUNDATION

foundation.learningforward.org

Visit foundation.learningforward.org to learn more about scholarships, donor opportunities, and more.