

Interim Assessments: *A User's Guide*

Interim assessments are an important tool for school improvement, but they are easy to use poorly. Mr. Marshall provides 10 guidelines for using these tests effectively.

BY KIM MARSHALL



INTERIM assessments are hot in American schools. Also called benchmark or periodic tests, these assessments are given every four to nine weeks to check on students' progress. Small wonder they are popular, since they embody three powerful insights: first, that initial teaching, no matter how good, can't bring all students to proficiency because of differences in their prior knowledge, attention, and motivation; second, that we shouldn't wait till the end of the year to find out who's confused; and third, that if we put our minds to it, we can fix many learning problems before they snowball.

Great teachers, athletic coaches, and drama and music instructors have always applied these insights,

and their intuitive sense of how to bring out the best in children is confirmed by three strands of research:

- Benjamin Bloom's work on mastery learning (which found that when teachers look at unit assessment results and work to get all students to 80%-85% mastery before moving on to the next unit, year-end achievement improves dramatically);
- the "effective schools" research (which found that

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beat-the-odds schools almost always made good use of data from ongoing assessments); and

- Total Quality Management (which showed that factories can produce higher-quality products if they pay attention to input from teams of workers and empower them to stop production lines and fix problems on the spot).

What happens when teachers don't use interim assessment data? The achievement gap widens. As Grant Wiggins puts it, "The more you teach without finding out who understands the information and who doesn't, the greater the likelihood that only already-proficient students will succeed."¹ Unfortunately, this is a very common state of affairs, which is why most schools are engines of inequality. The students who enter with disadvantages tend to be the same ones who don't understand after initial teaching, and they are also the ones who are harmed most when teachers move on without checking for understanding and following up. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

This is not the way we want our schools to be — hence the popularity of interim assessments, which claim to counteract such gap-widening tendencies.

PROBLEMS USING INTERIM ASSESSMENTS

In my work coaching principals in a number of districts, I'm seeing problems. Here are some common glitches in the use of interim assessments:

- Administrators sometimes fail to explain the rationale behind interim assessments, and so teachers see them as "one more thing" from the clueless central office. (All we do is test, test, test. Why don't they just let us teach?) When this happens, teachers tend to communicate their negativity to students, thereby souring the whole process.

- Teachers often fear that interim tests will be used to blame them for student failure. This makes them tighten up and not engage in the kind of free-flowing discussions of assessment data that can drive improvements in teaching and learning.

- Commercial interim tests are often poorly aligned with standards, state tests, and pacing calendars. When students are required to take tests on material they haven't been taught, they get discouraged, and their teachers get mad.

- When interim tests are given only two or three times a year, teachers can't fix learning problems in a timely manner. February is too late to find out about serious gaps in understanding.

- Interim tests that are short and superficial don't

give teachers enough information to have useful conversations with their colleagues on ways to improve instruction.

- When interim tests are scored externally, teachers have less ownership and interest and may shrug off the test reports. When teachers have to go online to get their results, navigating through complex websites, few are likely to persist and extract the data they need to improve their teaching.

- When turnaround time after interim assessments is long (as much as three weeks in some districts), the results are stale and outdated by the time teachers sit down to discuss them.

- When the "grain size" of interim test reports is too fine, teachers can get lost in the data and fail to focus on a few manageable challenges. When the grain size is too large (e.g., data are reported only on "number sense" or "comprehension"), follow-up conversations become superficial and unhelpful.

- Union or scheduling issues sometimes prevent same-grade or same-subject teams from meeting to discuss the data. This deprives teachers of one of the best forums to share best practices. While cross-grade teacher meetings are good for many purposes, the most powerful conversations about data occur when teams of teachers give common assessments to the same level of students on the same schedule — and have enough time to pore over the results.

- Many meetings designed to look at student data fall victim to the "culture of nice" — teachers chat amiably and don't confront ineffective practices or push one another to higher levels of performance.

- Astonishingly, some schools give interim assessments and then don't follow up with re-teaching and help for struggling students. This is the biggest reason that critics of interim assessments charge that they are nothing more than summative tests scheduled during the school year.

- Some schools use the results of interim tests to focus only on the "bubble" students — those on the cusp of proficiency who might, with just a little improvement, help a school make AYP (adequate yearly progress). This amounts to educational triage and does a huge disservice to other students who need help.

As I've watched well-intentioned, hard-working educators make these mistakes, I've realized that interim assessments are a lot harder to implement well than a lot of us thought. My colleagues and I in New Leaders for New Schools have gradually honed a list of the most important steps in implementing interim assessments so that they really make a difference.

INTERIM VS. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Many educators are using the terms “interim” and “formative” interchangeably and are fuzzy about the difference between these two quite different types of during-the-year assessment. Let me clear up this ambiguity and spell out the very different possibilities and challenges that each presents.

In their influential 1998 study, “Inside the Black Box,”² British researchers Paul Black and Dylan William focused almost entirely on what I’ll call *in-the-moment* assessments — *not* the more formal, every four- to nine-week *interim* assessments that Mike Schmoker, Douglas Reeves, Richard DuFour, Jeff Howard, and other U.S. educators have been touting. The in-the-moment toolbox includes: students writing answers on small whiteboards and holding them up so the teacher can gauge the overall level of understanding; “clickers” that gather instant electronic data on in-class quizzes; journal writing and exit cards to give teachers quick feedback on what students understand; more effective teacher questioning; and methods that randomize which students are called on (e.g., pulling popsicle sticks out of a can, each one with a student’s name written on it).

It makes perfect sense that these in-the-moment assessments improve teaching and learning. If teachers find out immediately which students don’t understand and which concepts aren’t getting through, they can clarify and re-teach before misconceptions and misunderstandings widen the achievement gap, and they can use the insights to teach the concept more effectively the next time around. In addition, when students know they might be quizzed on their understanding at any moment, they are more engaged and active learners. Expert teachers have always known this, and now Black and William and their colleagues are helping thousands more educators add these powerful methods to their repertoires.

There’s another way that in-the-moment assessments help improve learning: recent research at Washington University in St. Louis (reviving research from the 1930s) is showing that quick assessments (within 24 hours of initial teaching) significantly improve long-term memory by helping students retrieve, review, and make better brain connections with new information.³

In-the-moment assessments are powerful. When teachers use them well, more of their students will reach high levels of achievement. But the other kind of assessment for learning — interim assessment — checks for understanding several weeks after initial in-

10 guidelines to help schools exploit the full potential of interim assessments.

If you are using interim assessments, you may want to rate your school on a 4-3-2-1 scale to see which of these areas are going well and which need work.

1. Build understanding and trust.

The principal needs to explain interim assessments to the leadership team and the full staff and make sure everyone understands the powerful role these assessments can play in closing the achievement gap. Teachers need repeated assurances that interim assessments are low-stakes tests and will not be used as part of performance evaluations. Principals can build trust by distributing copies of the tests in advance and involving teachers in tweaking and improving them.

>> *The outcome should be a climate in which continuous adult learning can take place. Data without blame.*

2. Clarify learning outcomes.

All teachers need clear, manageable standards that spell out what their students should know and be able to do by the end of the year. And they don’t need them on web sites or in hulking three-ring binders, but in slim booklets right on their desks.

>> *Standards should be visible to students and parents and backed up by exemplars of proficient student work. No surprises, no excuses.*

3. Set a multi-year target and annual SMART goals.

Major gains in student achievement don’t happen overnight, so it’s very helpful for the leadership team and the teachers to agree on an ambitious yet attainable long-range goal. For example, 85% of fifth graders will be reading at Fountas-Pinnell Level W (instructional level) by June 2012. Grade-level teams can then set annual SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, Time-bound) goals. For example, 85% of first graders will be reading at Fountas-Pinnell Level I by the end of this year.

>> *SMART goals should be ratcheted up year by year, as high-achieving students progress through the grades.*

4. Get good interim assessments.

Whether it acquires them from the outside or writes

them in-house, each school should have reading, writing, and math tests that define on-the-way-to-college standards; are aligned with the sequence of school-based curriculum materials; reassess previous standards to provide ongoing, cumulative review and a sense of progress; evaluate higher-order thinking skills; and include both open-response and multiple-choice questions, as well as writing prompts with user-friendly scoring rubrics. Interim assessments present the classic Goldilocks dilemma: they need to be long enough so teachers can have substantive conversations about the results, but not so long that they are overwhelming to administer, score, and analyze.

>> *Interim assessments are, by their nature, low-stakes and don't have to be psychometrically perfect. However, they must be good enough and long enough to provide teachers with real insights for classroom follow-up.*

5. Schedule assessments and time for immediate follow-up.

Principals should block out time in the calendar for interim tests every four to nine weeks — along with times for rapid scoring, analysis, and data meetings (ideally within 48 hours). It's also important that there be several days for re-teaching after each interim assessment cycle.

>> *Unless these dates are in everyone's calendars, interim assessments will be constantly pushed aside by other events, and teacher meetings to look at data won't happen with regularity.*

6. Involve teachers in making sense of the assessments.

Teachers may complain about the work of scoring and analyzing interim assessments, but if time is set aside (without taking it away from students), teachers will end up appreciating and learning a great deal from working on their own students' tests. Of course, schools should take advantage of scanners to score multiple-choice items, but teachers must score the written responses of their students and stay close to the item analysis so they can celebrate their students' successes and form initial hypotheses about why students did poorly in some areas.

>> *The heart of the process of interim assessment is teachers making new instructional decisions based on timely information.*

7. Display data effectively.

Succinct spreadsheets and wall charts should make students' current status and progress graphically clear

to teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Displaying data in such a way can answer these questions: How did students do on each test item? How did students do on each standard? What's the big picture of achievement at this point (i.e., what proportion of students is proficient and above)?

>> *Robert Marzano has found such graphic display of data to be the second most powerful factor in boosting achievement,⁴ and it is especially effective when teachers and administrators see the names of individual students and how each of them is doing.*

8. Hold candid data meetings and planning for action.

Discussions of interim assessment data need to take place as soon as possible after each round of tests in same-grade/same-subject teacher teams (or, in very small schools, in one-on-one meetings between teachers and principals or instructional coaches). To be effective, these meetings need to be hard-hitting, honest, test-in-hand, and low-stakes. They should celebrate successes and then examine what students got wrong and figure out why they got it wrong. Focused data conversations rarely happen without a guiding hand, and many schools have found it helpful to have these data meetings facilitated by someone from outside the team.

>> *Teachers should leave each meeting with specific plans for next steps, such as a battle plan for whole-class re-teaching, small-group explanations, tutorials, and after-school work; teaching points for high-risk students; and distributed before-class work, mini-lesson, and homework topics.*

9. Involve students in the process.

Curriculum goals and interim assessment data have even more impact when they are shared with students so that each knows the answers to these questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? How am I going to close the gap?⁵

>> *Student investment in the improvement process is one of the great untapped resources in American schools.*

10. Follow up relentlessly.

Interim assessments are a waste of time if teachers don't implement their action plans and check to see if students improve. Richard DuFour and his colleagues have done some of the best work in this area, describing schools that refuse to let students fail.⁶

>> *Principals need to monitor the teachers' follow-up efforts and provide as much support as needed.*

struction and takes advantage of a more formal structure to provide an additional boost that can take teaching and learning to even higher levels. Here's how:

- Interim assessments check to see if students remember material from one to nine weeks ago, something in-the-moment assessments can't do.

- Interim tests can be more wide ranging and rigorous, tapping systematically into students' knowledge and understanding of what's been taught over several weeks and requiring students to apply what they have learned in novel situations.

- The results of interim tests can be made visible to teachers, administrators, and students in spreadsheets and wall charts, which means they can be analyzed and discussed more thoughtfully.

- Interim assessments, if they are cumulative, allow teachers and administrators to track students' progress as the year unfolds.

- Data displays make it possible for same-grade/same-subject teams of teachers to discuss collaboratively what students misunderstand, why they misunderstand it, and how the material can be taught more effectively. Whereas in-the-moment assessment data are usually seen only by one teacher, team discussions take assessment data out of the privacy of the classroom and make possible a synergistic discussion of best practices across several classrooms. When teachers confront specific data on their students' short-term errors and confusions, admit that certain teaching practices aren't working, and listen to the ideas of their colleagues, teaching improves dramatically.

- Interim assessment data allow principals, other administrators, and instructional coaches to get involved with the teams as they look at interim test results.

- When administrators who are familiar with data discussions visit classrooms, it's "as if they have donned 3-D glasses," says Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, a school leader in Newark, New Jersey. They have much better insights into what's going on as the curriculum unfolds, and they can shift the conversation to results when they give feedback to teachers.

- Because reports of interim assessment data contain the names of struggling students and the specific areas in which they are having difficulty, they can be used to identify students for systematic follow-up, including small-group tutoring and focused interventions with students of major concern.

- Interim assessments can simulate the content, format, and rigor of state tests, which can help reduce students' stress when they take formal state tests and

help them feel less threatened and more confident about taking any kind of test. But interim assessments can also be performance tasks and essays scored by rubrics, which can tap into the kinds of understanding and knowledge that state tests cannot.

So which are more helpful, in-the-moment or interim assessments? This is not an either/or question: we need both! But here's a theory. Interim assessments, done right, can have a ripple effect: they can fuel improvements in every other stage of the teaching/learning process. This is why I believe that interim assessments, if handled well, constitute the most effective single initiative that a principal can implement. They can help teachers plan better, teach better, use in-the-moment assessments better, and make powerful use of interim data to help close achievement gaps during each year.

While the idea of using during-the-year assessment data and sharing the outcomes is not new, it runs profoundly against the culture of most American schools. Our tradition is for teachers to work in isolation and be swept along by the pressure to "cover" the curriculum — and for principals to supervise and evaluate the process of teaching rather than discuss the results. The challenge for principals and other school leaders is to get teachers to slow down, reflect on what's working and not working, and orchestrate a continuous process of self-improvement, driven by insights from real-time assessments. This ongoing conversation is vital because changes in teachers' practices are deeper and more lasting when they come from within, as part of an ongoing, low-stakes, collegial dialogue about the best ways to get all students to high levels of achievement.

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3. David Glenn, "You Will Be Tested on This," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 June 2007, p. A14.

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