

STUDENT-CENTERED QUALITY ASSESSMENT

The National Education Association (NEA) supports instruction that differentiates and considers the needs, learning styles, and interests of individual students (National Education Association, 2017, Pg. 242). NEA also affirms that “a student’s level of performance is best assessed with authentic measures, including but not limited to extended curricular activities and opportunities, directly linked to the lessons taught and materials used by teachers” (National Education Association, 2017, Pg. 243). Based on the expertise of our own members, NEA recommends the following policies related to why, what, and how we assess.

WHY WE ASSESS

Frequently, educators use assessment to inform instruction through strategies like quizzes, oral exams, and classroom observations. These authentic assessments allow students, families, and educators to continuously understand student strengths and areas for improvement. Problems arise if what is taught does not align with state standards, curriculum, or assessments of student learning.

Educators must push back on using standardized test results to categorize students, schools, educators, and districts. At the higher education level, graduation tests and standardized assessments should not be part of college admission decisions due to their limited ability to indicate college readiness as well. NEA believes that assessment used in higher education, when appropriately designed and proctored, may be an important forecast of student and program needs (National Education Association, 2017, Pg. 245).

The reliance on standardized testing in American education systems spurred from racist ideas about diverse people. The incorrect and racist belief that for some students, including students of color, their inferior minds and perceived recalcitrance make educators unable to teach them beyond the basics is an example. Even school policies that provide greater community supports like preventative healthcare, nutrition, counseling intervention, and family engagement must be careful not to project these stereotypes and false altruism.

WHAT WE ASSESS

Standardized testing resulted from a belief that summative assessment can be used to indicate intelligence. Howard Gardner, a Harvard University psychologist, emphasizes that we must evaluate more than math and reading proficiency. Learner-responsive educators affirm that individuals have different capacities to learn and show skill in myriad areas: linguistic, artistic, cognitive, relational, etc. These *multiple intelligences* are what make each student a dynamic learner and confound the constraints of standardized testing.

A focus on authentic assessment- i.e. student work portfolios, observation, play-based checklists, group projects, home writing journals- also allows educators to connect learning in multiple academic disciplines, strengthen growth across multiple intelligences and developmental domains (cognitive, linguistic, physical, adaptive, social and emotional skills), and builds shared interest with students and families about learning goals.

HOW WE ASSESS

A 2008 NEA policy brief describes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a proactive way of teaching with accessible content standards, curricula, instructional methods and resources, and assessments. When using UDL strategies in a general education classroom, teachers have the flexibility to foster learning environments that provide one-on-one attention and engage all learners. Curriculum barriers are reduced; instructional assistance is readily available; students gain knowledge, skills, and curiosity from their interests; and learning is validly assessed.

NEA believes that educators must lead on quality assessment through their state and local affiliates. States and standardized testing companies “should employ a variety of developmentally appropriate assessment techniques that allow for universal design, necessary accommodations, modifications, and exemptions, and are bias-free, reliable, and valid” (National Education Association, 2017, Pg. 243-244). In the earliest grades, assessment using several factors should only be used to empower early childhood educators to teach successfully and personalize curriculum for individual student needs, identify children with disabilities, and to allow baseline data for comparison with future grade levels spans. Our youngest learners benefit from structured and unstructured experiences like imaginative, manipulative, constructive, games or sports with rules, and physical play. Such play is a primary way to measure progress like critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, executive functioning, communication skills, empathy, and self-regulation (National Education Association, 2017, Pg. 254).

TESTING CONDITIONS THAT ALLEVIATE BIAS & STEREOTYPE THREAT

Testing conditions, questions, and procedures have been proven to privilege white, male, and upper-class student groups (Staats & Patton, 2013, Pg. 30-34). Stereotypes influence how students see themselves and other societal groups in schools. Research has demonstrated that instructional bias has a profound and traumatic effect on students (Vanissar, 2010). Survival responses are triggered in the brain: fight, flight, freeze, appease, or dissociate. Each of these responses impact brain functions that support cognitive reasoning and frustrate new learning. Alleviating testing bias is especially important for students with disabilities, English learners, and underrepresented backgrounds.

NEA Policy Recommendations: Preschool–12th Grade Assessment

- ★ Utilize reliable, valid, and unbiased local assessments for early identification and subsequent supports for academic proficiency, school readiness, differing abilities, and English language development
- ★ Bar standardized testing in preK-3rd grade settings
- ★ Develop educator-designed assessment systems that highlight Response to Intervention (RtI), problem-based learning, play, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – four strategies rooted in authentic assessment.
- ★ Expand use of assessment practices that integrate culturally-relevant curriculum, high standards, authentic assessment, standardized testing, and assessment literacy with all stakeholders
- ★ Connect standardized testing content and skills to the history, culture, language, developmental abilities, and funds of knowledge of diverse student groups
- ★ Inclusion of students, families, educators, and other stakeholders in education practices, accountability, and policy decisions on how assessment impacts schools- particularly in underrepresented communities
- ★ Eliminate academic tracking that links standardized testing scores to access to rigorous coursework, AP/IB classes, and other advanced programs that disproportionately exclude students of color, poor students, English Learners, and students with disabilities

Suggested Resource: The NEA IDEA Resource Cadre of member experts recently published *Teaching Students with Autism* to share instructional guides, best assessment practices, exemplar policies, and resources.

NEA Policy Recommendations: Higher Education Assessment

- ★ Utilize reliable, valid, and unbiased local assessments for early identification and subsequent supports for academic proficiency, school readiness, differing abilities, and English language development
- ★ Expanded use of assessment practices that integrate culturally-relevant curriculum, high standards, authentic assessment, standardized testing, and assessment literacy with all stakeholders
- ★ Connect standardized testing content and skills to the history, culture, language, developmental abilities, and funds of knowledge of diverse student groups
- ★ Inclusion of students, families, educators, and other stakeholders in education practices, accountability, and policy decisions on how assessment impacts campuses- particularly in underrepresented communities
- ★ Promote higher education admission that incorporates test-flexible or test-optional selection criteria (i.e. SAT, ACT, or ASVAB) alongside grade point average, transcripts, extracurricular activities, goals statements, leadership experience, and recommendations
- ★ Ensure that higher education assessments are used to determine how to support student instruction and institutional progress- not to determine entrance into school programs, college, or professional fields

WHY WE MUST CHANGE HOW WE ASSESS STUDENTS

Effective educators are engaging, culturally-relevant, and highly expectant of the success of all students. Affirming classrooms allay stereotype threat and, consequently, create positive learning conditions that lessen the burden of standardized tests. Students understand that their intelligence- and overall value- is not tied to scores; similarly, these capable educators improve instruction and student learning in a stress-free, conducive environment that truly demonstrates their teaching excellence.

Educators must consider what, how, when, and why we assess students as we align high quality instruction, standards, and curriculum. While maintaining high expectations, capable educators also incorporate the diverse interests, needs, and developmental abilities of all students. Families, educators, and local school communities know our students best. Together, we must lead on quality assessment systems and school accountability with our student-centered solutions. This shift in power enables student-centered policies and opportunity for all students.

REFERENCES

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