

## Students 'Self-Assess' Their Way to Learning

Can students learn more by assessing their progress?

By **Jaclyn Zubrzycki**

Denver

Fifth grader Tacyana Thomas had put the finishing touches on a short paragraph. Now, she held her paper next to a model essay and compared her writing with her teacher's. Had she used evidence to back up her argument? Had she restated the thesis?

This was among the first of many times this school year that Tacyana will be asked to determine how her own work stacks up to a model. But she wasn't left to do so on her own. Tacyana and the rest of Maggie Martin's literacy class here at Gust Elementary School had just spent an entire lesson learning how to assess their own work using a rubric, a scoring guide that lays out what is expected of students.

Gust is one of a growing number of schools across the country where student self-assessment is one type of formative assessment that is woven into the school day. The idea is that just as teachers can teach more effectively if they check students' progress along the way, students can learn more effectively if they understand what they're working toward and where they are.

"You've heard lots about wanting student learning to rise," said Susan Brookhart, a Montana-based consultant and the coordinator of assessment and evaluation for the school of education at Duquesne University in Pennsylvania. "At some point, people said, 'Hey, wait a minute, kids have to be involved, too.'"

"Students aren't just empty heads to fill," Brookhart said. "They need to be aiming to learn something, not just aiming to comply with teachers' directions. Learning is much deeper if the student is thinking, 'I am doing this because it will help me learn this.'"

At its core, student self-assessment is driven by three basic

 [Back to Story](#)



# Blended by Design

Adaptive diagnostic, whole class and small group instruction, and personalized learning.

 **i-Ready**<sup>®</sup>



[Learn more](#)

**Special Report:  
Understanding Formative  
Assessment**

questions, she said. Students are taught to ask themselves, "Where am I going, where am I now, and where to next?"

But equipping students with the tools to accurately answer those questions, and providing teachers with the tools to teach students how to answer them, is a more complex task.

Advocates of student self-assessment are careful to say what it is not. Students are not filling out their own report cards. Nor are they passively reflecting on their work. Ideally, they are in between; actively judging their work and progress toward a goal, and determining what steps to take to reach it.

Many of the tools of self-assessment are by now familiar to most teachers: **Rubrics that clarify what level of work** will earn which score, and objectives at the start of lessons that remind students what they're aiming to learn.

### **Making Assessment Goals Student-Friendly**

But there is an art to creating just the right goals and models. Content standards are written for teachers, not students, so teachers must translate the content goals of a course into student-friendly language.

Perfecting that translation has been a focus of EL, formerly known as **Expeditionary Learning, a school-design network** that partners with 120 district and charter schools around the country, including Gust. The network refers to the goals as learning targets.

For instance, a standard that requires students to "understand the monetary value of coinage" might be translated into a learning target that says, "I can make change for a dollar using nickels, dimes, quarters, and pennies." That target is in more kid-friendly language and contains within it the content laid out in the standard.

**Ron Berger**, the chief academic officer of EL, said that those targets must be accompanied by models of high-quality work. He gives the example of a ballet dancer. A student studying ballet has, ideally, seen excellent ballet dancers perform. As the student is working on skills and routines, the excellent dancer is a model and inspiration.

Berger said that in this way, a model doesn't have to stifle creative or innovative work.

"The most important assessment that happens in any building is not the state assessment," Berger said. "It's the assessment that's going on in a student's head every day, before she turns in work, when she thinks: Is this good enough?"

Heidi Andrade, an associate education dean at the University of Albany in New York, said that student self-assessment can help improve academic achievement.

"When you ask students to monitor the quality of their work on standards and criteria, not surprisingly, they do better," Andrade said.

There is some debate about whether students' self-assessments need to be accurate. Some believe it's critical for students to be able to accurately mark their progress, while others believe the process of reflecting, thinking carefully, and revising is more important, said Andrade, who is in

[Searching for Clarity on Formative Assessment](#)

[Q&A: Misconceptions About Formative Assessment](#)

[Should Formative Assessments Be Graded?](#)

[New Tools Help Track Common-Core Learning](#)

[Students 'Self-Assess' Their Way to Learning](#)

[Arizona Leans In on Formative Assessment](#)

[Learning Progressions: Maps to Personalized Teaching](#)

[Technology Fed Growth in Formative Assessment](#)

[Types of Assessments: A Head-to-Head Comparison](#)

[Formative-Assessment Videos](#)

the latter camp. The idea is that students are being taught how to be metacognitive—to reflect on their own thinking—and to approach learning with the attitude that they can grow.

Andrade, who helped develop and popularize the use of the rubric in K-12 schools, said that she is concerned that some rubrics are either too vague or too hard to understand. She said it is also crucial that self-assessment is followed up with a chance for students to revise and improve their work. "Otherwise," she added, "what's the point?"

## **Incorporating Data**

Student self-assessment has gained traction at the same time that new technology and new assessments have provided teachers and schools with access to previously unimaginable amounts of data about students' performance, attendance, behavior, and more.

At many schools, students are given access to much of the same data as their teachers.

At Gust, Julia Padilla, a 5th grade math teacher, said she has seen a shift in the school's approach over her eight years there. "Students haven't always been aware of their progress," she said. "But now, they aren't surprised by the end result, and they feel they're more in control of it."

"The expectation is that not only are teachers using data, students are owning data," said Padilla. In her class, she said, students track their progress as they learn the multiplication tables and see their scores on standardized tests. She said students can even use behavior-tracking programs like Class Dojo to assess their own behaviors.

In Ms. Martin's class, Tacyana said the rubric "helps us understand more about what we're learning."

Principal Jamie Roybal said the idea of encouraging students to assess their own learning has become part of the school's culture. Self-assessment goes hand in hand with the idea that students can learn and grow, she said.

"It gives ownership and control of learning and growth back to students," Roybal said. At a staff meeting, Gust recently self-assessed its own performance in making time for student self-assessment, she said. "That's how much we're focusing on it."

That's not by chance. One component of the Denver district's **framework for evaluating teachers** is whether their students have the opportunity to self-assess.

Padilla said it takes time to teach students how to read rubrics or use systems to track their progress. But, she said, the shift is worth it. "I think students tracking their own data is key to getting students invested in their education," she said. "If they don't see the direct results in that moment, it's hard for them to know where to go."