

Standardized Tests and Formative Assessment

In classrooms all over the world today, the most common type of assessment is neither formative nor performance-based. Billions of dollars are spent on high-stakes, standardized testing that provide government agencies with information about what students are learning. The main purpose of these assessments is, at best, to provide teachers, local, regional, and national education agencies with information about their students' progress in comparison with other students, schools, and regions. At worst, these tests fuel competition among groups and create an unhealthy emphasis on skills and knowledge that can be efficiently and economically tested, often leaving little time for authentic learning activities. In any case, taking a high-stakes test resembles no discipline-based activity, such as conducting scientific experiments, using mathematics to design structures, writing persuasive arguments, or investigating local history. Furthermore, because of the scope and bureaucracy associated with these tests, the results often arrive long after students take the test.

Stiggins (2004) decries the impact of these high-stakes test on student learning and motivation. He recognizes, however, that they are not going away, so he suggests that rather than hoping that they will someday be eliminated, teachers should work to "build learning environments that help all students believe that they can succeed at hitting the target if they keep trying" (p. 24). Students who are confident in their ability to learn, who have acquired the thinking skills that enable them to handle all types of assessment situations, will succeed in all aspects of life and school, including high-stakes standardized tests.

The effective use of a variety of types and methods of assessment is critical in a student-centered classroom. This gives students a chance to show what they know and to find out what they need to work on, and it gives teachers the information they need to guide students to deep understanding of content and to help students become independent learners.

Becoming proficient at using different kinds of assessment to collect data about students' thinking and understanding about a topic is, arguably, the most important skill a teacher can develop. The information you collect about your students not only will help you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners, it will help your students take control of their own learning enabling them to get the most out of any learning environment for the rest of their lives.