

Using a Balanced Assessment Approach to Improve Student Learning

Susan Streitenberger and Daphne Irby

In Ohio, teachers with an initial license participate in a four-year resident educator program. During the third year, teachers are required to take a summative assessment measuring essential teaching practices, such as lesson planning, differentiated instruction, use of assessments, and the ability to engage students cognitively. This evaluation conveys a teacher's ability to deeply understand and reflect on concepts and to identify ways to improve practice. These teaching practices are an essential part

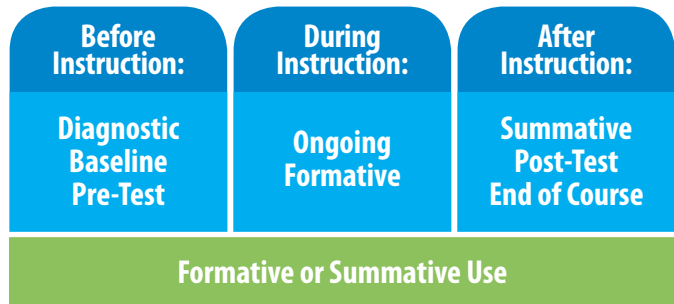
of the repertoire of good teaching. Data from this educator assessment shows that teachers' application of formative assessment can be difficult and challenging. Our data shows that teachers tend to understand common formative assessment practices; however, they do not always have the ability to interpret and use the results from those practices. These findings prompt a general need to improve teachers' assessment literacy.

Educational research on assessment practices in the classroom supports a balanced approach. When



Balanced Assessment System

What do I know about my students?



a comprehensive assessment program at the classroom level balances formative and summative student learning and achievement information, a clear picture emerges of where a student is relative to learning targets and standards.

What is a balanced assessment system?

How can teachers provide a balanced picture of a student's strengths and weaknesses? They must balance both summative and formative classroom assessment practices and information gathering about student learning. Assessment is a vast topic that encompasses everything from statewide accountability tests to benchmark or interim tests to everyday classroom tests. Assessment is information. The more information teachers and parents have about students, the clearer their picture of student achievement, including any gaps.

There are some differences between summative and formative assessments, and these differences lie in how they are used. For example, a quiz can be either a summative or a formative assessment. Therefore, it is important to understand not only what summative and formative assessments are, but also, the purpose of the assessment and how the data can be used to improve student learning.

What are Summative Assessments?

Teachers give summative assessments periodically to determine what students know and do not know at a particular time. Summative assessments often are associated with standardized tests such as state assessments, but they are also used in, and are an important part of classroom programs. Summative assessment at the classroom level is an accountability measure used as part of the grading process. It is important to think of summative assessment as gauging, at a particular point, student learning relative to mastering the content standards. Examples of summative assessments are state assessments, benchmark assessments, end-of-unit or chapter tests, and end-of-term or semester exams.

Projects and performance tasks are also types of summative assessments. A project can be used to gauge student learning over many standards, including content knowledge and presentation skills. A performance task is something a student demonstrates such as counting to a hundred or articulating sounds or any tangible product that serves as evidence of learning.

Purposes of Summative Data

- To determine class "grades"
- To report achievement of standards
- To determine retention or promotion
- To assess readiness for class placement
- To help evaluate the effectiveness of programs, school improvement goals and alignment of curriculum

What are formative assessments?

Formative assessments are both formal and informal practices that teachers and students use to gather evidence to improve learning. These are checks of understanding. Because these assessments are used to monitor learning, whatever score or feedback is given does not count toward a "grade." Formative assessments can also be used to create flexible student groups for remediation or enrichment and to provide information to the teacher on what might need to be retaught. Feedback is a critical component of formative assessments because the intent is to help the student understand what his/her misconceptions are and to reinforce areas of understanding.

Purpose of Formative Data

- To check for understanding
- To discover misconceptions
- To create flexible student groups for remediation or enrichment
- To provide effective feedback
- To adjust instruction to further student learning

What are the differences between formative and summative assessments?

Formative assessments are assessments FOR learning, and summative assessments are assessments OF learning

Assessments are determined as either formative or summative by how they are used in the classroom. A quiz

can be a formative or summative assessment depending on the purpose. The quiz might be a quick check to see what concepts a student knows and where s/he might still be struggling. In that case, the quiz would be a formative assessment. However, if the quiz were given to the student to determine if s/he mastered the content and to provide evidence of that learning, it would be a summative assessment. Formative assessment can be considered “practice.” As practice, teachers do not hold students accountable in “grade book fashion” for skills and concepts they were just introduced to or are still learning. Practice must be allowed so that students are given the time to learn. Formative assessment helps teachers determine next steps during the learning process, before the instruction approaches a summative assessment of student learning.

The most effective implementation of a balanced assessment system includes getting the student involved in their learning. John Hattie, as documented in his Visible Learning books, found through meta-analysis of many research studies, practices such as students monitoring and reflecting on their work and teachers providing formative evaluation have some of the most significant impacts on student learning, as measured by effect size.

Ways to increase student involvement

Criteria and goal setting with students engages them in instruction and the learning process by creating clear expectations. Students, to be successful, need to understand the learning target/goal and the criteria for reaching it. When students are involved in the assessment process, formative assessment is fully implemented. Students need to be involved both as assessors of their learning and as resources to other students. Self and peer assessment help to create a learning community within a classroom. Students who can reflect while engaged in metacognitive thinking are involved in their learning. When students keep ongoing records of their work, it not only engages them, but also helps them think beyond a “grade” by seeing the progress they are making toward the learning objective

Actions for school principals

Assessment is fundamental to good teaching practice. Now the question becomes, “What training and support will teachers need to create and sustain a balanced assessment system?” Schools need to help teachers as they use formative and summative assessment tools to enhance student learning. There are several actions that school principals can take that will help teachers



integrate a balanced assessment system into their teaching. For example, school principals can:

1. Place a schoolwide emphasis on using a balanced assessment system. Support teachers with the time, resources and coaching they need as they transfer new learning into their daily routines. A lack of consistent and targeted support can be a barrier to effective assessment practices.
2. Discuss and encourage good formative and summative assessments by creating a standard definition of the terms and reinforcing them at the school through conversations about classroom instruction.



Teachers often have varying understandings of what each term means.

3. Provide teachers with support and professional development specifically focused on using formative and summative assessments to improve student learning. Teachers need ongoing professional development to learn about formative assessment practices and how the data gained from them is used to improve instruction. Mentors working with beginning teachers should also be trained to use a variety of different assessment practices. The more a teacher knows about how their students engage in the learning process, the better s/he can adjust instruction to ensure that all students will reach attainment of the learning standards.

4. Provide time for teachers to observe and collaborate with other teachers around formative assessment. This collaboration gives teachers opportunities to reflect on practices while receiving feedback from colleagues.

5. Make use of walk-throughs to focus and provide feedback on teachers' use of formative assessment practices in the classroom. Periodically examine a teacher's summative assessment to understand its rigor

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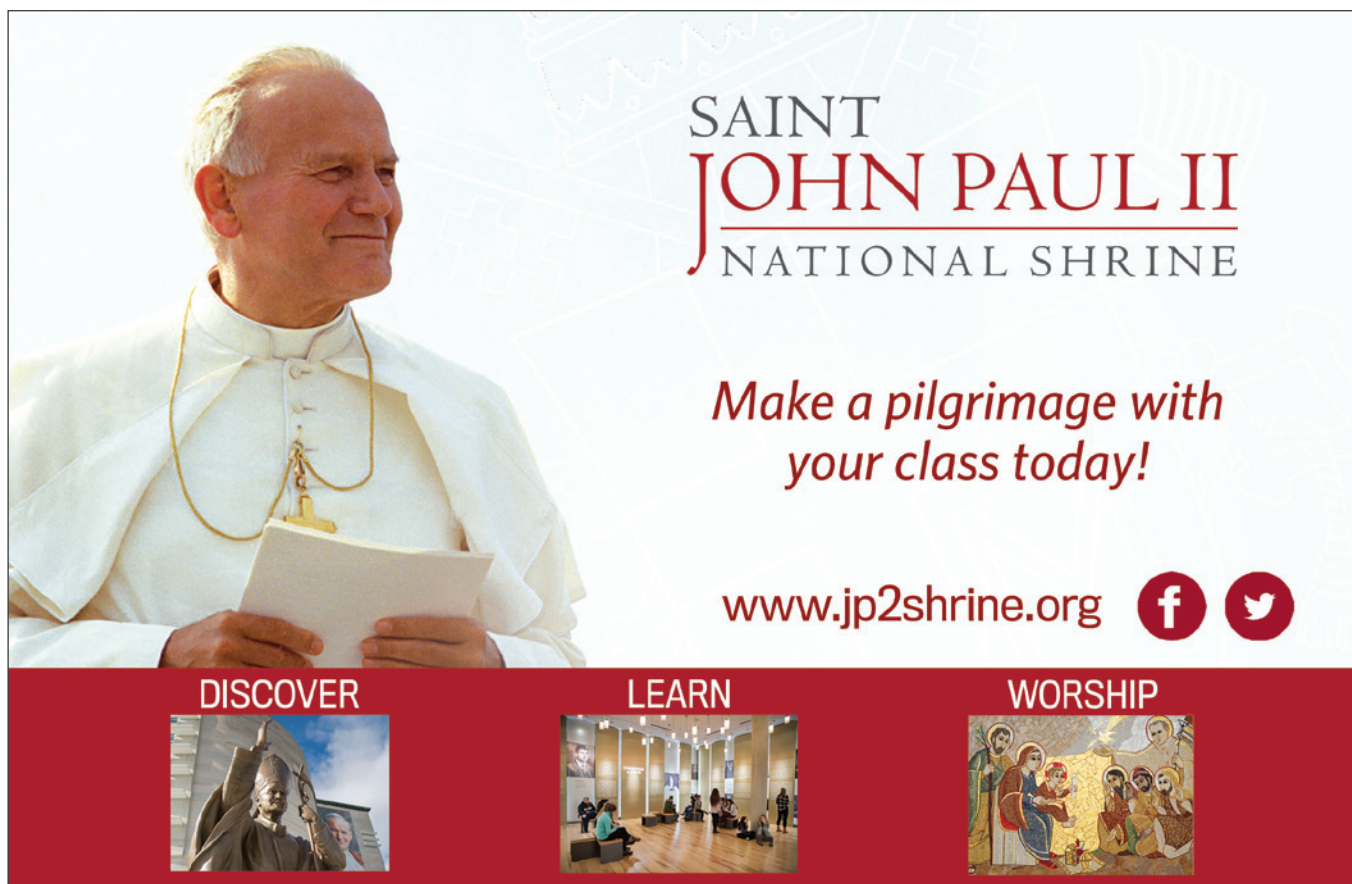
and alignment to the learning objectives and standards.

6. Use information from summative data assessments to improve student learning and improve instructional practices. Teachers, in turn, can use the data to decide student grouping and differentiation.

All assessments in education play a key role in revealing student understanding and performance. Multiple measures can and should be used to make informed instructional decisions. A balanced assessment system is the deliberate use of assessment that informs decisions at the classroom and school levels.



Susan Streitenberger, ssreitenberger@columbuscatholic.org


Daphne Irby, dirby@columbuscatholic.org




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