

The States' Role in Ensuring Assessment Competence

There is strong research evidence connecting sound assessment practice to student success, Mr. Trevisan notes. By requiring competence in assessment for licensure, states enhance their role in fostering this critical connection. In turn, they are able to exercise some control over one more variable in the student achievement equation.

BY MICHAEL S. TREVISAN

THE NATIONAL drive for increased student achievement has sharpened the national focus on the competency with which educators develop and use assessments. And for good reason. Richard Stiggins made a powerful connection between student achievement and the assessment literacy of teachers more than a decade ago. He argued that the majority of assessments occur in the classroom, tend to be the assessments of greatest concern to students, and hold the greatest promise for increasing student achievement.¹ A recent literature review of empirical studies across grade levels, subjects, and countries by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam provides compelling, if not overwhelming, evidence that classroom assessment conducted regularly and in a sound manner has a positive impact on student achievement and well-being.² Thus calls for sound assessment practices cannot be easily dismissed as mere reform rhetoric.

Some observers have called for assessment competence for *all* school personnel, including building principals, school counselors, and district administrators. These individuals argue that unsound assessment con-

ducted anywhere in the system carries risks for students.³ Note that these calls for assessment competence make no reference to externally mandated, large-scale tests (although interpreting scores from these tests, for example, could be a skill that educators need). Instead, these calls for competence refer to the assessments de-

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veloped, used, and controlled by school-level educators, sometimes every school day.

Despite national recognition of the need for assessment-competent school personnel, the level of assessment literacy of school staff members remains lower than hoped for. Studies examining teachers' grading practices and their comfort with and beliefs about a variety of assessment strategies continue to show a lack of understanding coupled with a great deal of confusion. Unfortunately, the picture for administrators is much the same.⁴

There are exceptions, of course. I have conducted inservice training on assessment for many teachers, administrators, and school counselors over the last 10 years, and I continually meet educators with a broad and deep understanding of the assessment process and a commitment to excellence in assessment. I'm encouraged by meeting and working with these educators. In an age of education reform when cheap rhetoric is often used to disparage the entire teaching force, I think it is important to recognize the good work and competence of many educators throughout the country. Yet my experience has also shown me that the number of educators with a clear understanding of the role of assessment is small. My experiences in working with educators on assessment matters are in line with national studies detailing the general misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of many educators with regard to assessment.

But given what we know about the positive effects of sound assessment and the detrimental effects on students when assessment is done poorly, we have to ask ourselves why more educators don't make an effort to conduct assessment in a sound manner, with student achievement and well-being in mind. Some have argued that a lack of training opportunities in preservice programs is the reason for the poor quality of assessment practice in our schools. William Schafer and Robert Lissitz sought evidence to support this argument in their research on preservice and graduate programs across the country. They asked what, if any, coursework in measurement and assessment is offered by these programs and whether any is required.⁵ They found that only a small number of programs required any assessment training for licensure.

When I meet educators who clearly have a strong understanding of assessment, I ask them where they got their training. The usual answer is that they are self-taught through reading, attending workshops, and trying various strategies in their classrooms to determine

what works. Once again, my own experience working with educators on assessment issues is right in line with the national picture regarding preservice assessment training.

In large part, the course content in preservice programs is driven by the requirements for licensure set at the state level. Thus, if states require assessment competence for licensure, students will receive assessment training in preservice programs. My purpose here is to clarify this connection so that state policy makers and those who work with them can act in an informed manner to establish clear assessment standards.

CURRENT STATUS OF STATE REQUIREMENTS

Investigating whether states require assessment competence for licensure is a fairly straightforward endeavor. After one calls all state licensing offices and asks that credential requirements for school personnel be sent, an examination of the documents should reveal the nature and scope of the assessment requirements.

However, there are limitations to this approach. First, states may be in the midst of changing requirements. If the new requirements include assessment competence, one might not know it unless the correspondence makes that clear or unless one specifically asks for this information. Second, information can be lost and requests misunderstood when communication takes place via voice mail. Third, some states communicate more precise preservice expectations through statewide meetings and correspondence. While this method is perhaps not the most efficient or systematic way to enhance the clarity of preservice expectations, it nevertheless occurs, can have a positive impact, and cannot be determined through examination of licensure requirements.

Limitations aside, state licensing documents can provide a fairly clear picture of state assessment requirements. The requirements must be approved by the state, often by oversight committees, and they are written into legislation. A good deal of importance is attached to these documents, since they represent state law, specify what the state views as essential for licensure, and are disseminated to anyone interested in pursuing a credential. A few researchers have conducted these studies over the last 10 years, and I offer a brief summary of findings here so that readers can get a sense of national requirements in assessment competence for licensure.

Teachers. In 1991 Rita O'Sullivan and Marla Chalnack examined state documentation and discovered that

only 15 states required or planned to require assessment training for licensure as a teacher.⁶ Peter Wolmut reported similar results when he examined licensing laws in 1994.⁷ Not until 1999 did this situation change, as reported by Richard Stiggins, who showed that 25 states now require specific assessment competencies for a teacher credential.⁸ Despite the sharp increase from the number requiring assessment training during most of the 1990s, Stiggins' findings still indicate that half of the states do not require competence in assessment for licensure as a teacher, leaving a new generation of teachers without an essential part of the training they need to improve student achievement and enhance student well-being.

Administrators I conducted the only formal study of state licensing requirements related to student assessment for school administrators.⁹ I found that, as of 1999, 18 states required some form of assessment competence, with only two states offering enough specificity to allow me to determine the nature and scope of the required competence. There is a troubling irony in a public policy that allows the supervisor of an employee not to have crucial knowledge and skills that the subordinate must have to perform fundamental job tasks.

School counselors Although they do not receive much attention in the literature on assessment literacy, school counselors also play an important role in the support of student achievement. For example, school counselors assess student career interests, assist with interpretation of scores from standardized achievement tests, and administer tests to place children in special-needs programs. In a recent study, Lisa Marr-Lyon and I examined state certification requirements for counselors with respect to assessment and found that 33 states require some form of assessment competence.¹⁰ Though this is more encouraging than the state requirements for teachers and administrators, all but four states lacked the details necessary to properly ascertain precise competencies.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

The findings from investigations of state certification requirements illustrate that there is still a good deal of work to be done to clarify the expectations of states with regard to assessment literacy. Several national organizations have developed assessment stan-

dards for school personnel, and these provide a starting point for state agencies to begin clarifying their expectations. A full description of each set of standards would be too long for this article, but interested readers may contact the organizations listed below to obtain copies of their assessment standards. Contact information is provided in the footnotes.

These organizations have many purposes, but the fact that all of them have established national assessment expectations for school personnel signifies the importance they place on assessment competence. And they all offer their standards in part as tools that state agencies can use to ensure the assessment competence of school personnel. Brief descriptions of each organization and its set of standards follow.

National Council on Measurement in Education. The National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) promotes scholarship in measurement and the dissemination of this knowledge to influence policy and practice.¹¹ In 1990 NCME, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA) collaborated to develop seven standards for teacher competence in assessment.¹² These standards seek to promote the effective use of assessments for instructional decision making.

In a joint effort with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), NCME developed assessment competencies for school administrators.¹³ There are 12 competencies organized in three broad strands: 1) assisting teachers, 2) providing leadership in developing and implementing assessment policies, and 3) using assessments in making decisions and communicating assessment results.

Recently, the Association for Assessment in Counseling (AAC) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), in partnership with NCME, developed assessment and evaluation competencies for school counselors.¹⁴ There are nine competencies that deal with assessment use, administration, score interpretation, presentation of statistical information, development of interviews and questionnaires for evaluation, and the importance of evaluation information for decision making. Specific statements detail the knowledge and skills required of school counselors to demonstrate each competency.

Council of Chief State School Officers
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"Because he's illiterate. That's why I always have to read to him."

ficers (CCSSO), an organization of the chief state education officers, works on behalf of state agencies serving K-12 education.¹⁵ The CCSSO established the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) in 1987. The purpose of the consortium is to develop and promote model teacher standards and to support teacher preparation and licensure. INTASC developed 10 principles that organize the knowledge and skills expected of new teachers.¹⁶ Each principle is organized into knowledge, disposition, and performance targets, with indicators for each. Principle 8 is devoted to assessment standards for new teachers, particularly the knowledge of different types of assessments and the ability to use both formal and informal assessments to increase student achievement.

Another project sponsored by the CCSSO is known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). Since 1994 ISLLC has developed and promoted model standards for effective leadership.¹⁷ Six leadership standards were detailed and organized in the same fashion as INTASC, with knowledge, disposition, and performance targets. Indicators devoted to high-quality use of assessment are integrated throughout the standards and include developing a school vision for high academic achievement, continuous school improvement, knowledge of a variety of assessment strategies, and curriculum evaluation, to name just a few.

National Policy Board for Educational Administration. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) works to advance professional standards for the field of educational administration.¹⁸ The NPBEA identified 21 domains of competence for school principals.¹⁹ Domain 12, measurement and evaluation, outlines three roles for school principals with regard to assessment: 1) manager, using assessment information for particular purposes; 2) leader, developing an assessment vision for the school staff; and 3) communicator, delivering assessment information to a variety of audiences. Specific indicators are presented for each role.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. As the name implies, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) functions in large part to accredit counseling-related training programs. It is the main accrediting body for school counseling programs.²⁰ The accrediting standards reflect the best knowledge and skills in the field of counseling, and the assessment standards provide a solid basis for state agen-

cies to develop assessment competencies for licensure as a school counselor.

AN EXAMPLE

In 1993 Washington State passed education reform legislation that includes higher academic standards for all students, state assessments to monitor student progress, and accountability provisions for schools and districts. In addition, the state revised its licensing requirements for teachers, principals, and school counselors to reflect the attainment of national standards in each profession. Specifically, teachers are expected to meet the INTASC requirements; principals, the NPBEA expectations (soon to be changed to the ISLLC standards); and school counselors, the CACREP standards.

Although these changes have not received the same publicity within the state as the new K-12 curriculum and tests, they have made it necessary to examine the preservice programs for educators at Washington colleges and universities. Although the state expectations set this examination in motion, how individual training programs deal with meeting these expectations has been left largely to their own discretion. For the assessment component of the professional standards, the process has resulted in curricular and instructional changes — some minor, others more significant — for programs across the state. For example, some programs have added a course in assessment, while others have integrated assessment expectations into existing courses and preservice educational experiences.

BENEFITS

The benefits of adopting well-thought-out, rigorously developed assessment standards for licensure have clear payoffs for state agencies. First, by adopting standards already developed by other organizations, state officials can save considerable professional time, energy, and money. Developing professional standards is labor intensive and takes a good deal of time to do well, and time is in short supply in state agencies these days. Moreover, the time must also be accompanied by state dollars to pay for support staff, advisors, transportation, and other requirements. And if anything is in shorter supply than time these days, it is money.

Second, the standards listed in this article have all been developed by researchers interested in the professional practice of school personnel and by practitioners interested in improving the competence and pro-

fessionalism of their fields. While each set of standards combines research and the input of practicing professionals in somewhat different ways, all have the value that professional standards can attain when research and practice are combined. Some may rightly judge that the knowledge and skill emphases differ across these standards, that the organization and structure of some sets of standards are more or less meaningful, or that the language in a particular set of standards is not altogether clear. But the point is that the standards at least provide a starting place to begin to fashion assessment expectations for school personnel.

Third, recognizing a training gap in the education of school personnel, several states are providing professional development in assessment for practicing educators. Such training is critical, and state policy makers have fortunately seen merit in this effort and funded these statewide initiatives. For the long term, however, states could save considerable money by ensuring appropriate preservice training in assessment.

Finally, the ultimate benefit of clear assessment expectations for professional licensure accrues to the students served by these professionals. That is, teachers will be trained to recognize the value of clear expectations for student achievement and to use assessments productively for students' academic well-being. School administrators will know how to support teachers in their day-to-day classroom assessment tasks, how to develop a vision for academic excellence, how to lead school and district staff members toward this expectation, and how to communicate achievement results to the community effectively. Meanwhile, school counselors will have the assessment knowledge and skills they need to provide feedback to students regarding career choices and to assist teachers and parents in interpreting standardized test scores.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I do not offer the strategy of clarifying state licensing requirements with respect to assessment literacy as a panacea for low student performance. After all, assessment is but one component in a large education system with many variables. By itself, providing for the assessment literacy of professional educators may have little impact on academic achievement. In addition, if assessment training is to become a sustainable component of a preservice training program, it ought

"She's our spell checker."

to be part of a broad discussion of program philosophy and potential programmatic changes, rather than simply another add-on. Given the different value orientations of faculty members, this will not be an easy task.

Moreover, simply clarifying licensing expectations with respect to assessment without providing additional resources to institutions to deal with these expectations may be an approach doomed to failure. For evidence, we need only look to the many states that mandate higher standards for K-12 students but provide little in the way of resources and support for teachers who must implement a new or substantially revised curriculum. Student achievement in these states tends to remain stagnant.²¹ Ironically, some state budgets have expanded K-12 spending to provide inservice training for practicing teachers at the expense of the higher education institutions that train the teachers in the first place. In those states the task of garnering resources for preservice programs in assessment will take considerable initiative and resolve on the part of policy makers.

But make no mistake. There is strong research evidence connecting sound assessment practice to student success. By requiring competence in assessment for licensure, states enhance their role in fostering this critical connection. In turn, they are able to exercise some control over one more variable in the student achievement equation.

1. Richard J. Stiggins, "Revitalizing Classroom Assessment: The Highest Instructional Priority," *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1988, pp. 363-68.

2. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning," *Assessment in Education*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1998, pp. 7-74.

3. Richard J. Stiggins, "Assessment Literacy," *Phi Delta Kappan* March 1991, pp. 534-39; and Gregory J. Cizek, "The Big Picture in Assessment and Who Ought to Have It," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1995, pp. 246-49.

4. Gregory J. Cizek, Shawn M. Fitzgerald, and Robert E. Racher, "Teachers' Assessment Practices: Preparation, Isolation, and the Kitchen Sink," *Educational Assessment*, vol. 3, 1995, pp. 159-80.

5. William D. Schafer and Robert W. Lissitz, "Measurement Training for School Personnel: Recommendations and Reality," *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 38, 1987, pp. 57-63.

6. Rita G. O'Sullivan and Marla K. Chalmik, "Measurement-Related Course Work Requirements for Teacher Certification and Recertification," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices*, Spring 1991, pp. 17-19.

7. Peter Wolmut, "Assessment Competencies for Teachers: What Do Licensing Laws Demand?," paper presented at the conference on Classroom Assessment: Key to Unlocking Student Achievement, Portland, Ore., 1994.

8. Richard J. Stiggins, "Evaluating Classroom Assessment Training in Teacher Education Programs," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices*, Spring 1999,

pp. 23-27.

9. Michael S. Trevisan, "Administrator Certification Requirements for Student Assessment Competence," *Applied Measurement in Education*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1-11.

10. Michael S. Trevisan and Lisa Marr-Lyon, "State School Counselor Certification Requirements for Assessment Competence," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, 1999.

11. Contact information: NCME, Central Office, 1230 17th St. N.W., Washington, DC 20036-3078; ph. 202/223-9318; www.ncme.org.

12. American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education, and National Education Association, "Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices*, Winter 1990, pp. 30-32.

13. *Competency Standards for Student Assessment for Educational Administrators* (Washington, D.C.: AASA, NAESP, NASSP, and NCME, 1997).

14. The competencies for counselors can be found on the Web at <http://aac.necat.edu/>. Click on Resources.

15. Contact information: CCSSO, One Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-1431; ph. 202/408-5505; www.ccsso.org.

16. The INTASC competencies for new teachers can be found on the Web at www.ccsso.org/intascst.html.

17. These competencies can be found on the Web at www.ccsso.org/isllc.html.

18. To contact various members of the NPBEA, go to www.npbea.org.

19. Scott D. Thompson, *Principals for Changing Schools: Knowledge and Skill Base* (Fairfax, Va.: National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1993).

20. Contact information: CACREP, 5999 Stevenson Ave., 4th Floor, Alexandria, VA 22304; ph. 800/347-6647, ext. 301; www.counseling.org/cacrep/.

21. David J. Hoff, "Missing Pieces," *Quality Counts 2001: A Better Balance* (Bethesda, Md.: Editorial Projects in Education, 2001), pp. 43-52. ◀