

## Improving Learning Through A Comprehensive Assessment System

The Issaquah School District believes that an effective system for improving K-12 learning requires implementation of a comprehensive assessment system. A comprehensive assessment system connects curriculum, instruction and assessment by aligning instruction to curriculum standards and by using assessments to determine students' status and progress on these standards.

The Issaquah School District's assessment system is designed to serve two major purposes: instructional support and educational accountability. Current research and discussions of assessment approaches have led to a distinction between these two purposes as assessment **of** learning and assessment **for** learning. This distinction among assessments is based on the **function** they serve. State, district, building level, and classroom assessments may be formative or summative depending on how the information is used. While it is convenient to describe the components of a comprehensive assessment system separately, the effectiveness of the system depends on the interconnections of the parts.

Assessments **of** learning are primarily designed to determine a student's progress on key learning targets at the end of an instructional sequence, to measure student progress towards meeting state standards, and to provide public accountability.

Assessments **of** learning may be used to:

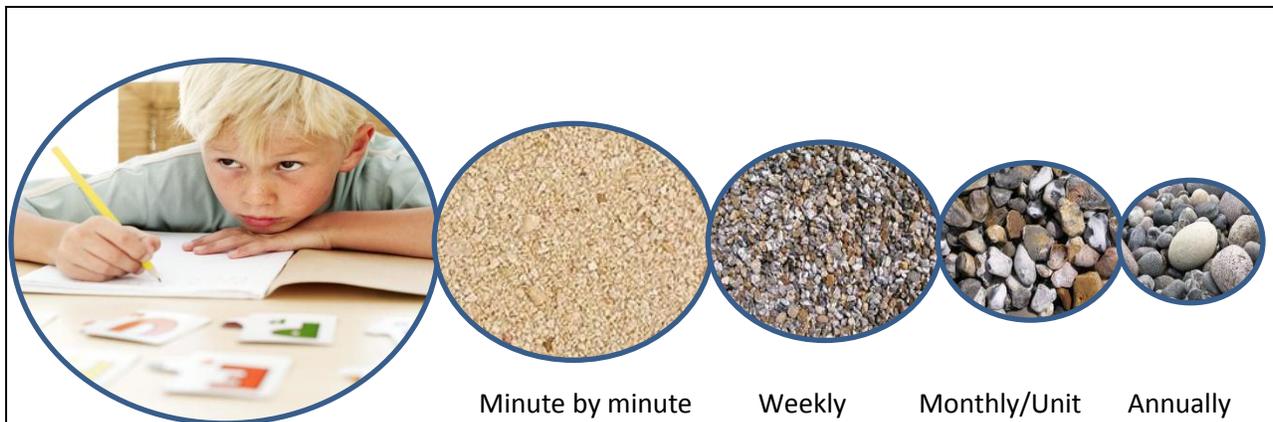
- provide teachers actionable information on students' progress in learning key instructional targets
- identify students' strengths and weaknesses in the standards of the assessed content areas
- provide feedback to students for reflection in order to enable deeper learning

Formative assessment practices are primarily designed to be assessments **for** learning. Many definitions for formative assessment are provided in the assessment literature (Sadler, 1989,; Black and William, 1998a, 1998b, Popham, 2008; Perie et al., 2010) and these all share certain common elements. William's definition seems to include most features of other definitions. "An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in the absence of that evidence."

Assessments **for** learning use a variety of techniques to:

- elicit evidence of student's learning;
- provide feedback that focuses attention on the assessment task at hand;
- provide students and teachers guidance as to what to do next to improve learning; and
- support students in developing proficiency on the targeted content and skill.

Classroom-based assessments may be used in a formative or summative way depending on the decision being made. Teachers commonly use both types of classroom-based assessments in their everyday teaching practices. Classroom-based assessments used summatively, like end of unit assessments in science may be used for grading, while classroom-based assessments used formatively such as the question of the day in Making Meaning, an elementary reading comprehension curriculum, help a teacher better understand where students' knowledge and skills are so they can adapt their instruction and increase students' learning.



The graphic above illustrates the level of specificity needed to inform teacher's actions around instruction. You will notice great specificity is needed when assessment occurs during instruction; while a broader grain size can be used the farther away from instruction the assessment occurs.

Assessments farther away from instruction (MSP, HSPE, Stanford) measure larger concepts and can be used to answer questions like: What are the strengths or weaknesses in individuals' or groups' learning, how are subgroups performing over time?

Assessments closer to instruction measure more specific concepts and can be used to answer questions like: What is the gap between students' current learning and the goal? What individual misconceptions or difficulties are my students having?

## **Summary:**

The Issaquah School District's assessment system must serve as a mechanism for coordinating and aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment and as a bridge between teaching and learning. All aspects of the system must be aligned with the curriculum standards. All assessments within the comprehensive system play important roles in supporting assessment **of** learning or assessment **for** learning.

Validity is the crucial element in the use and interpretation of assessment information. The degree to which the assessment aligns to district and state content standards determines the degree to which assessment information can be used to make inferences about students' knowledge or growth with respect to these standards. All District designed assessments will align to district and state content standards.

Issaquah School District's professional development will be intentionally focused on helping teachers learn strategies and procedures for:

- eliciting evidence of student learning,
- providing effective feedback
- developing appropriate instructional interventions targeted to students' strengths and weaknesses as identified by the evidence

Training will emphasize strategies for developing instructional responses aimed at the next steps in learning for each individual student.

This paper is partially based on the white paper by Dr. Joseph M. Ryan, Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University which was commissioned by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's Assessment Division when legislative act RCW 28A.300.041 required the development of a comprehensive state-wide assessment system. It has been altered to reflect the Issaquah School District's vision of what constitutes a comprehensive assessment system.