

## What is a Balanced Assessment System?

Paul D. Nichols

Under President Obama's education reform agenda, the concept of a balanced assessment system has received increasing attention. But, what is a balanced assessment system? The foundation of a balanced assessment system is the understanding that education includes a number of different consumers of assessment information. Each different consumer has different needs and uses for assessment information.

The first group of consumers must respond to the assessment needs at the classroom level. This group includes students, parents and teachers. This group typically uses assessment information to make formative decisions, i.e., identify instruction that can increase a student's learning.

The second group of consumers must respond to the assessment needs at the building and district level. This group includes principals, curriculum specialists and superintendents. This group typically uses assessment information to make decisions about the progress of groups of students or the impact of specific programs.

The third group of consumers must respond to the assessment needs at the state and national level. This group includes district, state and national leaders. This group typically uses assessment information to make decisions about resource allocation and public policy.

*"A balanced assessment system is a set of interacting assessments focused on serving the needs of different consumers of assessment information for the common purpose of improving education."*

A balanced assessment system is a set of interacting assessments focused on serving the needs of different consumers of assessment information for the common purpose of improving education. A balanced system is not a system with an equal number of tests of each kind or in which each assessment carries the same weight. What makes an assessment system balanced is the alignment of different assessments to the different consumer's information needs such that the needs of all consumers are met.

No single assessment can satisfy the assessments needs of all of these groups of consumers of assessment information. To satisfy the needs of a consumer group, an assessment must meet the following criteria:

- Be intended to meet a specific purpose;
- Be constructed to assess a common definition of student learning;
- Be designed to fill the need of a particular consumer and fit a particular consumer's context.

Thus a balanced assessment system might consist of three components:

- A locally administered and scored classroom-based assessment intended to provide formative information to students, parents and teachers;
- An externally developed, interim assessment intended to provide information on student progress for principals, curriculum specialists and superintendents;
- A large-scale assessment administered once a year that provides an annual summary of student status to support policy decisions by district, state and national leaders.

This set of assessments may form a balanced assessment system if the configuration of different assessment types and processes truly fulfills the multiple needs of the different assessment consumers.

For further reading, see:

Bazemore, M., Cippoletti, B., Howard, T., Jones, L., Redfield, D.L., & Roberts, M. (2008, June). Connecting the dots: Balanced comprehensive assessment systems. CCSSO's National Conference on Student Assessment, Orlando, FL.

Redfield, D., Roeber, E., & Stiggins, R. J. (June, 2008). Building Balanced Assessment Systems to Guide Educational Improvement: A background paper for the keynote panel presentation. CCSSO's National Conference on Student Assessment, Orlando, FL  
<http://www.ccsso.org/content/PDFs/OpeningSessionPaper-Final.pdf>

Chappuis, S., & Stiggins, R. J. (10/10/2008). [Finding balance: Assessment in the middle school classroom](#). Middle Ground, 12(2), 12-15.