



EBOOK

# Building a data-informed district from the ground up

## Start with early learning

**nwea**



## **What does it mean to be data-informed?**

A “culture of data” is on every educator’s wish list. But what does it really mean? What does a data-driven classroom or district look and sound like?

## The roles and goals of a data-informed team

A data-informed team is one that uses trustworthy qualitative and quantitative insights to make short- and long-term instructional and operational decisions. At the district level, this may look like using interviews or surveys to evaluate programs or analyzing school-wide assessment data to determine resourcing needs. In the classroom, a data-driven teacher might determine interventions based on observations and test results—or plan lessons after determining the unfinished learning needs of the class. Students who are comfortable with data can pinpoint where they are in their learning and develop goals that are meaningful, ambitious, and realistic.

## A culture of data begins in the early learning classroom

When early elementary teachers have the trustworthy data they need to make informed instructional decisions, they can better support students with unfinished learning, screen for reading difficulties, and differentiate or group students based on where they are in their learning.


Leveraged effectively at this critical point, [this type of data can be trajectory-changing](#). Consider the early learning phenomenon known as the [Matthew Effect](#): Students who enter school with reading weaknesses experience slower growth and gaps widen. Students who enter reading on or above grade level typically continue to do well, [boasting increased high school graduation rates, decreased likelihood of grade retention, and even a decline in criminal or delinquent behavior](#).

It's never too early to support students with unfinished learning.

**“Research and professional best practices show us that early childhood is a place of tremendous leverage, but it is also a place for care and consideration. Given the potentially massive impact of appropriate, quality educational programs and interventions for children at these ages, relying on the best sources of data to inform decisions is critical.”**

**Cindy Jiban, PhD**

[“How to navigate early childhood assessment”](#)



## **The role of assessment in a culture of data**

Educators can agree about the importance of early childhood education, but the methods and practices of instruction and assessment may vary. Consider the early literacy landscape. There are multiple frameworks and approaches for teaching students how to read, and many debates exist around whether to assess our youngest students and how to go about it.

We do not intend to add to the noise of these debates, but this much is clear: assessment for all students, including early learners, has a crucial place in a culture of data. The needs and goals of your school or district are unique. Here's what to look for when choosing a high-quality assessment that will garner relevant, trustworthy insights.

# What does a high-quality early childhood assessment look like?

To get a holistic view of student understanding, educators are encouraged to combine multiple tools and measures from across the assessment landscape. According to leading early childhood scholars, [including our own early literacy expert Dr. Cindy Jiban](#), each assessment solution for early learners should be:

- **Purposeful:** The design, use, and interpretation of assessments must be intentional.
- **Beneficial:** Assessments of children must serve to optimize learning.
- **Instructionally aligned:** Assessments must be clearly and explicitly integrated into the overall system, including curriculum and instruction, and the material assessed must represent the valued outcomes on which instruction is focused.

## Choosing the right assessment

In a joint report, [trusted organizations](#) that focus on the learning and developmental needs of young students suggested early childhood assessments should do three things:

1. Put purpose front and center.
2. Be clearly and explicitly integrated into the overall system, including the curriculum and instruction.
3. Optimize a child's learning.

When determining which assessment provides the best data for your team, return to this list to level set. These conversations should be led by your team's unique needs and goals. See the next page for guiding questions to consider.

### Work together to build trust

When choosing an assessment, district and building leaders should work closely with classroom teachers and coaches to clarify pain points and data needs any new assessment solution should resolve. Collaborating early in the process goes a long way toward building trust in the tool and the insights it provides, which is crucial for fostering a culture of data.

# 14 must-ask questions when evaluating early childhood assessments

[See this post in its entirety on our blog, \*Teach. Learn. Grow.\*](#)

We have identified 14 key questions to ask when evaluating early learning assessment tools. This list will help you think critically about how a new assessment will fit with your schedule and standards—and about how you might use the data. We hope these questions help you make the best decision for your early childhood program.

## Assessment purpose and data use

1. Does the assessment's intended purpose match our goals?
2. Is it aligned to our standards (e.g., state standards)?
3. Does it screen for students at risk?
4. Does the resulting data inform instructional next steps?
5. Can it measure growth throughout the year and across grades?

## Time and resources required

6. Can the early childhood assessment be administered with current technology and staff?
7. Does it generate results immediately?
8. Can our teachers be trained easily?

## Developmental appropriateness

9. Are the content and format of the assessment child-friendly and age-appropriate? Is the assessment engaging and motivating for young learners?
10. Is it responsive to a range of student performance levels?

## Quality of reports

11. Are the results objective?
12. Are the reports easy to interpret and use?

## Personalized practice opportunities

13. Does the assessment provide opportunities for personalized guided practice?

## Ongoing support

14. Is ongoing support provided by the assessment vendor, including technical help and professional learning opportunities?

# What is trustworthy assessment data?

Trustworthy assessment data is valid, reliable, and free from bias. Validity refers to whether an assessment measures what it intends to measure. When an assessment has strong evidence of validity, educators can be confident that the tool provides an accurate result and that the result is the best estimate of student performance.

Every assessment is an attempt to estimate a student's true achievement level in a particular subject based on a subset of items. An assessment's reliability is an estimate of the consistency with which the test measures a student's performance. Many providers offer a student's score along with a standard error range. A narrower range increases the confidence in the result for greater reliability.

A research-driven assessment is developed by researchers and psychometricians to ensure the tool is valid, reliable, and free from bias to yield the best results.

## What about data quality?

While the assessment may be valid and reliable, the data is only useful if students are well-prepared, engaged, and giving their best effort during the assessment. That's why certain steps must be taken to ensure data quality. Time of day, the season, proctor or parent involvement, and even whether students have eaten can impact the quality of the data. Students should be properly prepared for any assessment, and educators should use multiple measures to determine mastery, assess growth, or make placement decisions.

# Meet MAP Suite for Early Learning

MAP® Suite for Early Learning is a collection of assessment solutions purpose-built to measure reading and math skills and competencies for primary students. MAP Growth™ and MAP Reading Fluency™ with Coach work together to deliver trustworthy data that empowers teachers and supports students with unfinished learning.

## MAP Suite for Early Learning is:

### Holistic

Educators can assess the five key components of reading, including a comprehension check in MAP Reading Fluency with Coach. This provides helpful data as students first learn to read and further develop their skills.

### Efficient

All of the assessments are group-administered, both onsite and remotely. MAP Reading Fluency with Coach replaces traditional one-on-one reading fluency measures. Now, teachers can assess the entire class in about 20 minutes, preserving valuable instructional time.

### Aligned

MAP Suite for Early Learning is standards-aligned and available to use with any curriculum.

### Actionable

Easy-to-use reports offer relevant insights at the individual, class, grade, and school levels to support instructional and operational decision-making. MAP Reading Fluency with Coach guides students through personalized reading exercises, delivering real-time microinterventions that strengthen foundational literacy skills.



## **Imagine what's possible for early learners in your school or district**

Teachers have the insights they need to suggest targeted interventions and make instructional plans. Students feel empowered to take charge of their learning and set meaningful goals. Building and district leaders can make operational decisions and foster a culture of data throughout their school or community.

It's possible, right now. Your journey begins with trustworthy data from high-quality assessments, purpose-built for early learners.

Ready to transform your relationship with data?  
Connect with us to get started.

[NWEA.org](https://nwea.org)



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