

WHITE PAPER

Assessment data gives students choice and a voice



Assessments, and the data they generate, are one of the most powerful tools used by educators to measure the growth and performance of students over time. They enable teachers to personalize instruction and administrators to maximize learning resources. But what can growth data do for students?

It's well established that when students have some choice and input in their learning, they tend to perform better and even feel better about their progress. A [2007 study out of Eastern Michigan University](#) found that elementary school students who made active choices in their learning showed significant improvement on standardized tests.

Growth assessments can play an important role in inspiring students to take charge of their learning by giving them a clear understanding of their strengths and areas for opportunity—and by illuminating a way forward to reaching their highest potential. Looking at the teacher-student relationship as a partnership opens options for motivating students by giving them agency to make decisions that directly impact their educational headway.

Getting students to understand the purpose of assessment: Growth

It's critical for students to understand what they know now and where they want to go to truly own their learning. Tuning out the noise of outside forces and internal judgments to get a realistic view of their knowledge is nearly impossible. Assessment data, however, can offer that view clearly and accurately.

Assessments should be viewed as much more than a simple report card. They are checkpoints over time that accurately measure skills and allow for specific course corrections on a granular

level. This can help teachers challenge students who are below or at grade level, as well as those performing at levels far in advance of their peers. The ability to pinpoint areas of focus and develop meaningful, realistic targets offers a clear path to achievement—and helps develop a [growth mindset](#), a valuable trait that will pay dividends well into college and career.

Communicating to students early and often about the purpose of assessments and how they add value to their education is key. Explain what the data is being used for at a school, classroom, and personal level. Make sure they know that assessment is a meaningful activity with the ultimate purpose of guiding them to drive their own learning.

Student-driven goal setting based on assessment data

One of the best tactics to help students connect to their assessment results to drive their own learning is [goal setting](#). Using their data to understand what they can do today to set ambitious, yet achievable, goals flips the script from working for their teachers to working with them.

When students form and work toward goals, those goals become the glue that ties assessment events together. Goals also allow students to gain skills to assess their current knowledge and commit to learning more.

The process of goal setting can take many forms, from highly structured and scheduled to more informal and ad hoc. What's most important is that it's an organic and dynamic process that gives students true ownership of their academic growth. Schools that achieve consistently good results with goal setting share some common practices:

Start goal setting early

Even as early as kindergarten, students are capable of setting goals. They can be simple behavioral goals: don't talk during class, put away your toys, or line up after recess. Or they can relate to developing skills like learning the alphabet. At this stage, the focus is on understanding what a goal is and how it guides learning. Meeting them generates a sense of pride in achievement and sets expectations for future grades.

Have frequent check-ins

Building the connection between effort and outcome takes time and practice. Once goals are set, the most important action a teacher can take is to check in often. That can mean once a week or even once a day.

If math assessments are taken in the fall, winter, and spring, for example, this provides an opportunity to share current results with students and set individual goals to work on in the short term. A goal might emerge to raise proficiency in geometry with steps outlined to achieve it.

Once a goal is documented, the process is just beginning. By checking in frequently and offering support, the impetus is on the student to put in the work. The teacher is acting as a guide, but the student is ultimately in charge of meeting expectations.

Use visuals to reinforce goals for students

Reinforcing growth toward goals with visual tools is a powerful way to engage students. Options include worksheets, data notebooks, and personalized learning plans. A good assessment

system will have reports that can be shared with students to show progress toward goals or assessment targets. When students can see their progress on a scale that's connected to concrete learning objectives, they're better motivated to make improvements.

Keep goals relevant

Starting goal-setting conversations by discussing personal goals is a good way to get students to see the benefits of making commitments to growth. If they're struggling with something at home, say balancing homework with soccer practice, that's a good place to start brainstorming solutions. That can transition into classroom goals to make them more relevant.

When the conversation focuses on improving a grade or assessment result, it helps students recognize that they have some control over their learning. The setting of relevant goals illustrates the connection between learning and achievement.

Give students choice and voice

When students have choice, they have a voice. Goal setting is a critical way for students to exercise choice to map out their educational path. Choice in the classroom has been shown to boost students' feelings of self-worth, increase interest in learning, and prove the value of personal decision making.

It's also the best tool for teachers to use when developing personalized learning plans. Assessment data clearly reveals areas of strength and areas where skills are lacking. Teachers can propose goals based on where improvement is needed and offer steps necessary to get there. Ultimately, choosing the goal should be in the hands of the student.

The value of assessment in early learning

In a perfect world, every child would enter kindergarten on an equal footing. In real life, we know that this is not the case. [Early childhood is when achievement gaps begin to appear](#)—a fact that holds true regardless of demographics. It's also the best time to identify and address gaps to bring students to grade level and reduce learning disabilities.

Assessments that provide reliable proficiency data on students from kindergarten to third grade are key to detecting skill deficits to drive early interventions. [Students with reading difficulties](#), for example, will have a much harder time catching up with their peers once they've entered the second grade without proactive remedial efforts. Low achievement in mathematics can limit access to post-secondary education and increases the risk for lifelong socioeconomic struggles.

Assessment data is highly valuable on the classroom, school, and district level. Tracking cohorts over time can reveal common areas of weakness that could be reflective of curriculum disconnects that can then be addressed.

Measuring what students know, identifying where they've made progress, and deciding what they're ready to learn next is important at every grade level. Deep insights into the progress of early learners are necessary to create personalized learning paths that boost future achievement.

Student choice and ownership lead to future success

Students who understand the role of assessments, choose specific and achievable goals, and take ownership of their learning are better prepared for life after graduation. That applies to their personal, academic, and career domains.

Building critical life skills

When a student is actively engaged in their education, they boost their academic abilities as well as non-academic skills. In a [2018 Gallup poll](#),

teachers and parents identified several life skills that they would consider to be important to a student's future success. Here are just a few that are encouraged by student-driven learning:

- Self-confidence
- Accountability
- Collaboration
- Resiliency
- Active listening
- Self-discipline

According to a [2014 study](#), 60% of employers believe that having a broad range of skills and knowledge across fields is important to the long-term career success of recent college graduates. They placed the most value on the ability to successfully demonstrate non-academic skills including critical thinking, teamwork, and communication.

By overcoming obstacles and meeting goals in the classroom, students develop life skills that are integrally important to meeting challenges in college, career, and personal life.

College readiness versus college success

Assessments are generally assumed to gauge college readiness, but can they help predict college success? The answer is yes, because they look beyond the report card or year-end test to show progress over time and give students the opportunity to address gaps before they enter college.

[That same Gallup poll](#) found that parents shared that sentiment, with a majority saying that assessments accurately measure whether their child will be successful in college “somewhat well,” “well,” or “very well.” They also found assessments useful in predicting successful outcomes in college, work, and life overall.



How to know if an assessment solution will empower students

Not all assessment tools are designed to fully support students in taking control of their learning. To accurately measure performance in relation to grade-level expectations, it should be built to show where students are in their understanding—not simply tally correct and incorrect answers.

That means it should adapt in real time to challenge students without discouraging them. Even high-performing students are at risk for complacency and stagnant growth if they are not appropriately challenged.

The item pool of an assessment should be deep and measure enough depth of knowledge to gauge a student's true understanding. Normative data needs to be inclusive of comparative data on a national scale to be reliable. Finally, an assessment should be accessible to the widest number of learners. That means it should include features such as text-to-speech, item aids, and bilingual dictionaries.

In closing

Assessment systems that empower students to take charge of their learning—by engaging and motivating them with meaningful data—can change a student’s trajectory for the rest of their life. Not only will they be an active part of their K–12 education, they’ll also be better prepared to take ownership of their learning with them to college. The skills they learn from being deeply involved in their education—from collaboration to self-discipline—can help them succeed in their careers, too, paving the way for lifelong success.



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