

back to the basics



The Top 10 List of Frequently Asked Questions About Common Assessments

By Thomas W. Many, Ed.D.

Teachers often have many questions about common assessments. For example, what is the relationship of common assessments to a specific text, learner standards or a program? How often should common assessments be administered? Should they be standardized? What is the relationship between common assessments and writing prompts? Who should develop and score them?

These are all great questions, and we have taken the 10 most frequently asked and answered them below. What does your team think about the following?

1 Is there research to support using common assessments?

As Doug Reeves, Rick Stiggins, Rick DuFour and others say, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests using common assessments that reflect the essential curriculum in combination with providing students with more time and support helps all students learn to high levels.

2 What should common assessments be linked to?

Common assessments are linked to the essential curriculum. They reflect what we expect our students to learn and help measure how well students are learning the concepts we have agreed are part of the essential curriculum. Data is meaningful when teachers meet and talk about how their students did in comparison to others on the same measure against an agreed-upon standard of achievement.

3 Who should develop common assessments?

The classroom teacher is the best person to develop common assessments, either by writing items from scratch, by borrowing them from publisher's tests, or by taking sample questions from past exams. When teachers create common assessments collaboratively, results are always better than when tests are created by publishers who have no knowledge about our students, our classrooms or our community.

4 How do teachers develop common assessments?

Common assessments are developed after a comparison of what has been taught (usually found in the teacher's plan book) with what was expected to be taught (as reflected by the essential curriculum). Common assessments can be more sophisticated, but a good "rule of thumb" to use as a guide is four or five questions for each of four or five standards on each common assessment. That's plenty, if done well!

5 Where do questions for the common assessments come from?

Questions for common assessments may be taken from textbooks, black-line masters, sample test banks or previously administered classroom tests. The questions on the common assessments can come from many sources, but first and foremost, a common assessment should be developed by teams of teachers and reflect the essential curriculum as agreed to by faculty and staff.

6 Can common assessments help pace instruction?
When common assessments are given to all students at about the same time during the school year, teachers know whether individuals and groups of students are mastering the material more quickly or more slowly than typically expected. Common assessments are a guide, a gauge, a means to monitor the pace of instruction as our students move through the curriculum.

7 How often should common assessments be given?
Common assessments are designed to give teachers feedback about how their students are doing. Giving common assessments only two or three times per year is helpful, but does not provide teachers enough feedback. There is also a danger of creating an overwhelming amount of testing unless we substitute common assessments for some of the traditional end-of-chapter tests, quizzes and writing assignments we have used in the past. Most teachers find that giving common assessments every four to six weeks is most beneficial.

8 Are common assessments formative or summative?
This is best viewed as a continuum, and common assessments can contain aspects of both formative and summative assessment. Information gathered from a common assessment can be used in formative ways to help guide instruction. Results of common assessments can also be used in summative ways to identify the information students have mastered at a particular point in time.

9 How are common assessments related to intervention plans?
Common assessments provide feedback that helps teachers know which students need more time and support. Each school may approach interventions in different ways, but common assessments can help teachers identify the intervention that best meets a student's needs.

10 Do common assessments have a role in professional development?
Teachers who use common assessments are able to share the results of their instruction in job-alike meetings. Teachers share ideas, strategies and techniques they have found to be successful. When based on common assessments, job-alike meetings provide an opportunity for teachers to learn from one another, which is often the best source for strategies that work. Job-alike meetings also give teachers a great venue in which to talk about interventions and to share what works and what doesn't work.



Each of these Top 10 is a great question to ask and respond to as you move toward collaborative solutions founded upon the three questions from Rick DuFour (2002) that guide your teaching:

- What should students know and be able to do as a result of this class, course or grade level (curriculum framework)?
- How do we know they've learned it (common assessments)?
- What do we do when they don't learn it (interventions)?

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