

# Getting the Most Out of Common Assessments

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*Pioneer is one of eight schools in the nation featured in the video “The Power of Professional Learning Communities at Work: Bringing the Big Ideas to Life.”*

*Pioneer’s standardized test scores rank first of all the middle schools in Orange County and in the top 1 percent for the state of California. Additionally, Pioneer was named a California Distinguished School in 2003 and 2007, and is currently a state nominee for National Blue Ribbon recognition.*

Like most schools that begin implementing PLC practices, the faculty at Pioneer Middle School learned about the importance of common formative assessments and decided that we would utilize this powerful tool to help us focus on learning. Unfortunately, as time progressed, our departmental teams experienced varied levels of success; some teams felt they gained significant benefits from their common assessments, while other teams were far less enthusiastic with their results.

As principal, my first thought was to question whether every team was truly using common assessments, or were they just going through the motions to appease me. After asking these questions at a faculty meeting, I was pleased to find that every team was frequently administering common assessments—in fact, every team said they also use our site assessment software, which produces powerful reports to analyze the results.

At this point, I was perplexed: If every team was giving common assessments and had access to the same types of disaggregated results, then why were our teams experiencing such varied outcomes? Upon further consideration, I realized that I was asking the wrong question; that is, it was not a question of, “Are we giving common assessments?” but “What are we doing with our common assessment data?” When we discussed this question, we found great differences from team

to team, with some teams digging deeply into their common assessment data, and other teams doing almost nothing with the information.

Based upon this revelation, we discussed *why* we give common assessments, and determined that common assessments provide essential learning information that enabled each team to:

- **Identify specifically which students did not demonstrate mastery of essential standard(s):** Because we give common assessments to measure student mastery of essential standard(s), common assessments should identify students that need additional help and support. Additionally, if an assessment measures more than one essential standard, then the test results must provide more than an over-all score for each student, but also delineate specifically which standards each student did not pass.
- **Identify effective instructional practices:** Because our teachers have autonomy in *how* they teach essential standards, it is vital that common assessment data help validate which practices were effective. This can be done best when common assessment results are displayed in such a way that allows each teacher to compare their students' results to other teachers who teach the same course.
- **Identify patterns in student mistakes:** Besides using common assessment results to identify best instructional practices, this data should also be used to determine ineffective instructional practices. When analyzing the types of mistakes that failing students make, patterns emerge that can point to weaknesses or gaps in the initial instruction.
- **Measure the accuracy of the assessment:** Through a careful item analysis of the assessment, a team can determine the validity of each test question. Over time, this will build a team's capacity to create better assessments.

- **Plan and target interventions:** The ultimate goal of any PLC is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. If a team uses common assessments to identify students in need of additional help, determine effective and ineffective instructional practices, and measure the validity of the assessment, then they should have the information needed to plan and implement targeted interventions to assist the students that need help.

Once we realized that giving common assessments is not an end in itself, but instead a means to better measure our teaching and student learning, we decided that whenever a team reviews common assessment data, they would ask the following guiding questions:

- **Specifically which students did not demonstrate mastery?**
- **Which instructional practices proved to be most effective?**
- **What patterns can we identify from the student mistakes?**
- **How can we improve this assessment?**
- **What interventions are needed to provide failed students additional time and support?**

By asking these questions, we believe that we can get the most out of our common assessments, which in turn, allows us to give the most to our students. In the end, we learned from this experience that the power of common assessment comes not from giving them, but from what we do with them after we give them!

