

Assessments 'of' and 'for' Learning

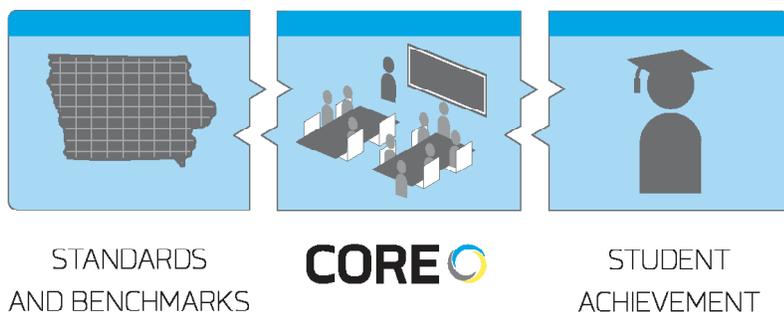
The Iowa Core Curriculum challenges the status quo of teaching. It targets higher-order concepts and skills deemed most relevant to students' lives and careers. Memorization and recall of facts are not the end goal as much as learning how to apply lessons in more complex ways.

To meet these new expectations, districts may need to revamp instructional assessments, especially the level of formative assessment practices used by both educators and students. Districts must ask if their monitoring plans effectively gauge whether all students are gaining that deeper understanding of the Core Curriculum's key concepts and skills.

The answers may rest heavily on the kind of dialogue happening between educators and students. "What truly will make a difference will be the assessments done in the classroom," says Judy Jeffrey, director of the Iowa Department of Education.

Unlike standardized tests that might happen once a year or a semester, formative assessments take place throughout a teaching unit and red-flag learning gaps. Teachers then can quickly respond and adjust lesson plans for learner differences. With the teacher providing descriptive feedback, students are able to adjust their learning tactics. Experts increasingly believe this collaborative feedback is essential to raising student achievement.

Guidance in expanding the best use of formative assessment is being folded into the department's professional development offerings for teachers. But mastering it won't be a case of taking a course and calling it done. "It's a continuous improvement process," says Jeffrey. "Every really great teacher is a professional who knows that they need to continually get better at their skill." Eventually, she hopes, all educators will instinctively know **which** assessments to use **when** in order to produce the highest achievements for all students.



Iowa Testing closely tracks the Iowa Core Curriculum

Iowa Testing Programs remains a close ally of Iowa's Core Curriculum effort. A representative served on both Project Lead Teams that recommended the Core's essential concepts and skills for grades K-12. The Iowa-based testing service also conducted in-depth studies of how the Iowa Tests of Educational Development aligned with the Core Curriculum. The answer: Alignment is extensive. A planned update of the Iowa Tests of Educational Development, expected by 2011, is likely to be aligned even more closely.

Assessments 101

Educational assessments generally fall into two camps: assessments of learning and assessments for learning.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS are "assessments of learning," since they're most often conducted after learning has occurred - at the end of a semester or a year. The Iowa Tests would be among the best-known summative assessment tools, and also are key to meeting legally mandated assessment requirements like No Child Left Behind.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS promote a two-way street with teachers and students to gather immediate feedback. Students receive better-defined instruction while teachers can see where instruction needs adjustment. Journals, weekly reports, pre-tests and written assignments all would be tools used in this assessment area.

Match up assessment plans with the Iowa Core Curriculum

When it comes time to measure the gains from the Iowa Core Curriculum, standardized tests offer an excellent starting point. Iowa schools have long relied on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Iowa Tests of Educational Development to assess student achievement and hold their districts accountable for student learning.

“The Iowa Tests will continue to play an important role,” says Judy Jeffrey, director of the Iowa Department of Education. But a district also may need to expand its mix of assessment tools and tests. Districts must be sure assessment plans support the higher learning called for by the Core Curriculum. It calls for rigorous, student-focused learning as well as a different portfolio of skills, including employability skills for the 21st century, and financial, health and technology literacy.

“The learning we’re seeking through the Core Curriculum cannot be easily measured on standardized tests,” notes Jeffrey, “and there won’t be any one assessment that evaluates all parts of the Core Curriculum.”

The Core Curriculum raises the bar on all students’ achievement – no matter the career path – and helps educators focus on teaching the most essential lessons. Thus, assessments must evaluate how well students have mastered those critical, higher-level thinking skills.

“This is about students doing real intellectual work, rather than just covering content,” Jeffrey says.

Districts will be expected to conduct a detailed local examination to determine what steps are needed to fully align their assessment plans with the Core Curriculum’s essential concepts and skills. Options might include using some of Iowa Testing Programs’ new end-of-course exams for key high school subjects. Math and science are already in the field; language arts and social studies should arrive in 2009. The department also is working with Iowa Testing on a new writing test for elementary, middle and high school students that will align with the essential concepts and skills for literacy.

The department is not touting a one-size-fits-all assessment solution for Iowa schools. Each district is unique and with local leadership must craft the right recipe for satisfying the Core Curriculum goals. But professional development efforts will help guide school districts as they analyze their portfolio of assessment tools and develop a new strategy for meeting the critical goals of the Core Curriculum.

The assessment path

Assessment plans nest in layers. At each level, educators must ask: What do we need to know? What do families need to know? What data is needed to make wise decisions about student learning?

