



---

Is It a House... Or a Pile of Bricks? Important Features of a Local Assessment System

Author(s): Theodore Coladarci

Source: *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 83, No. 10 (Jun., 2002), pp. 772-774

Published by: Phi Delta Kappa International

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20440251>

Accessed: 11/03/2010 15:05

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=pdki>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



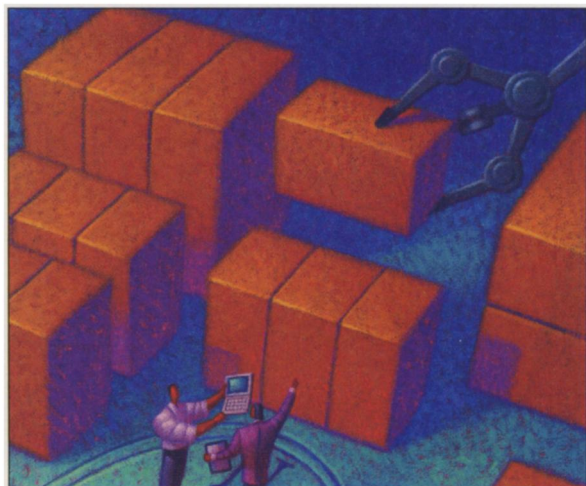
*Phi Delta Kappa International* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Phi Delta Kappan*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## A SPECIAL SECTION ON ASSESSMENT

# Is It a House . . . or a Pile of Bricks?

## Important Features of a Local Assessment System



By addressing the six features that Mr. Coladarci describes, school leaders will be working more deliberately toward a true local assessment system, rather than a mere collection of assessments.

BY THEODORE COLADARCI

**I**N 1996 the Maine legislature established the *Learning Results*, a comprehensive set of standards to be achieved by all students.<sup>1</sup> The legislators further decreed that student achievement of these standards must be measured by a combination of state and local assessments. Toward this end, Maine school leaders now face the daunting charge to develop “local assessment systems.” It is not yet clear whether the Maine Department of Education will subject a district’s assessment system to procedural review and approval, but the stakes are high nonetheless: by 2007, a high school diploma in Maine will be tied to achievement of the *Learning Results*, and local assessment systems are to provide the means for certifying this achievement.

To be sure, the welcome upside of these developments is that school leaders in Maine are being asked to *meld* state and local achievement information for certifying achievement of state standards. This synthetic approach runs counter to the practice in 18 states — soon to be 24 — where high school graduation is linked inextricably to passing a state test.<sup>2</sup> However, a clear downside of the Maine policy is the absence of clarification — from the state legislature, from the experi-

ence of other states, or from the professional literature — regarding just what a local assessment system is. While the term “local assessment” is clear enough, “assessment system” is often used in reference to a *state’s* testing program. For example, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, a standards-based state test, is administered to all students in grades 4, 8, and 10.<sup>3</sup> So again, just what is a “local assessment system”? In particular, what makes such a system, in fact, a *system*? This is the fundamental question with which Maine school leaders are currently wrestling.

The Maine Department of Education formed an

---

THEODORE COLADARCI is a professor of education, College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine, Orono.

advisory group, of which I was a member, to deliberate this question. Fueled by our resolve to provide helpful guidelines to school leaders and informed by the thoughts of others,<sup>4</sup> we identified what we believed to be important features of a local assessment system. Insofar as Maine is not alone in calling for the creation of such systems, our observations may provide guidance for school leaders in other states as well. Indeed, as more and more states begin to revisit the advisability of single-test graduation policies,<sup>5</sup> the notion of an assessment *system* may be seen as an increasingly attractive alternative to high-stakes testing. This is now even more likely as a consequence of the No Child Left Behind Act, which allows states to use a combination of state and local assessments in satisfying the requirement for annual testing in grades 3 through 8.<sup>6</sup>

#### WHAT IS A LOCAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEM?

A “system,” the *American Heritage Dictionary* tells us, is “a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole.” Elements in a system must cohere. Thus a local assessment system is a coherent, coordinated plan for assessment. It is a constellation of measures that, together, yield data that document progress toward student mastery of announced learning targets. Clearly, the system is made up of individual assessments. But a collection of assessments does not entail a system any more than a pile of bricks constitutes a house. Therefore, the fundamental question for school leaders is this: In what sense does their plan constitute a *system* of assessments, rather than a mere *collection* of assessments?

In the view of the advisory group, a local assessment system has at least six important features. First, *the assessments collectively are relevant to announced learning targets*. That is, a local assessment system provides evidence of student achievement regarding formally specified, rather than tacit or implied, learning targets. Further, these learning targets are stated with sufficient specificity to communicate measurable outcomes — outcomes that are directly amenable to measurement and assessment. The prefatory “guiding principles” of the *Maine Learning Results* (e.g., “Each student must leave school as a clear and effective communicator”) are examples of goals that lack the requisite specificity. To be sure, measurable outcomes can be *derived* from such statements. In Maine, this task is accomplished by the delineation of “performance indicators” for each content standard in the *Learning Results*. Without this

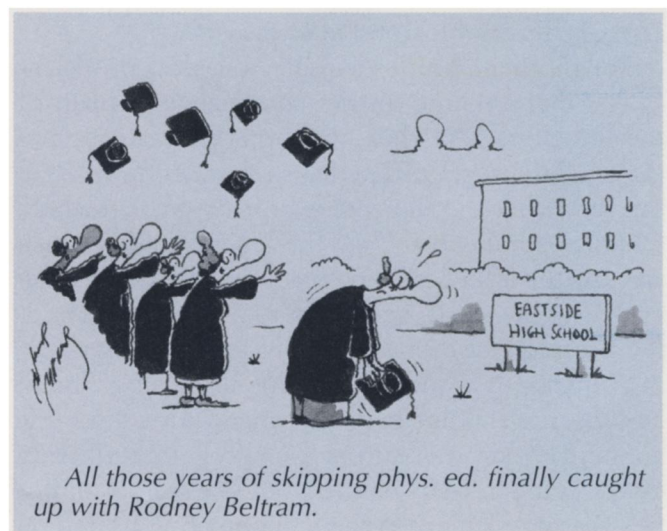
translation of the general to the measurable, however, assessment is problematic at best.

Second, *a local assessment system is made up of assessments that are initiated at the classroom, school, district, and state levels*. Classroom-level assessments reflect the day-to-day evaluation practices of teachers, such as running records, unit exams, papers, projects, performances, and portfolios of work samples. School- and district-level assessments involve students across multiple classrooms. For example, a district might administer a reading proficiency test to all second-graders or a science proficiency test to all eighth-graders.

What is the role of a state-mandated test in “local” assessment systems? The Maine Educational Assessment (MEA), aligned with the *Learning Results* and administered to all Maine students in grades 4, 8, and 11, is an important source of evidence regarding local progress toward achieving the state standards. While “MEA” and “local assessment” are arguably contradictory terms, “MEA” and “local assessment *system*” are not. Thus a valid state-mandated test can — and should — be considered an element of a local assessment system.

Third, *the assessments are conducted in multiple grades*. Classroom-level assessments, of course, are conducted in all grades, whereas school-, district-, and state-level assessments are most likely administered to selected grades. Only by considering achievement information across multiple grades can one monitor local progress toward student mastery of the learning targets.

Fourth, *the assessments draw on multiple formats — “traditional” and “alternative” alike*. There are various ways to appraise student learning, such as a selected-response format (e.g., multiple-choice, matching, or true/false items), a constructed-response format (e.g.,



worked problems, short answers, essays), and performance measures (e.g., projects, demonstrations). No one method is sufficient for all purposes. For example, selected-response items are arguably superior to either constructed responses or performance measures for assessing recall and basic understanding of a large body of content, whereas the latter two methods are preferable for assessing written, oral, or behavioral expression. Insofar as the announced learning targets will doubtless represent a variety of outcomes, a local assessment system should comprise a variety of means for assessing those outcomes.

Fifth, *a local assessment system allows for multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and skill development.* A single administration of an assessment, whatever its form, typically provides an insufficient basis for making inferences about student proficiency. Inferences are more defensible when students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. For instance, a performance assessment can be conducted at several points in time, or the same learning targets can be assessed through a combination of assessment formats.

Finally, *each assessment in the system has an announced rationale.* In particular, the assessment's purpose, audience, and articulation with other assessments in the system should be clearly stated. For example, perhaps the announced purpose of classroom-level assessments is to monitor achievement and guide instructional decisions on a day-to-day basis, with students and parents serving as the primary audience. As for their articulation with other assessments in the system, classroom-level assessments might be seen as yielding more detailed, nuanced, and contextualized information about student achievement than, say, district- or state-level assessments can be expected to provide.

For another example, consider a reading proficiency test that a school district administers annually at the end of grade 2. Here, the formative evaluation of the reading program is perhaps the stated purpose of this test, while the audience is primary-grade teachers, school board members, and the general public (which suggests the related purpose of accountability). In comparison to the fourth-grade state test, the district's reading test might be seen as providing a more comprehensive portrait of a student's reading proficiency and at a more critical point in development. Also, given the announced purpose of this test — program evaluation — its "standardized" nature would be seen as an important complement to the achievement information

that derives from classroom-level assessments.

Although the assessments that constitute a system differ in their announced purposes, audiences, and articulation, the individual assessments do not exist in isolation. Each should be used by educators to confirm their inferences and conclusions from other measures in the local assessment system.

## FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the six features just described, there are technical issues that school leaders must consider when developing and monitoring local assessment systems.<sup>7</sup> Although a detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, in general each assessment in the system must be of demonstrable validity and reliability. That is, each should measure what it is supposed to measure, and it should do so consistently. Further, interpretation of assessment results should be guided by clear performance standards. Finally, these technical considerations are important for the system as a whole, as well as for the individual measures that it comprises.

The making of a local assessment system requires considerable thought, effort, time, and resources. The system is not established quickly and in one fell swoop; it evolves. By addressing the six features above, school leaders will be working more deliberately toward a true assessment system, rather than a mere collection of assessments.

1. *State of Maine Learning Results* (Augusta: Maine Department of Education, 1997). Available at <http://www.state.me.us/education/lres/lres.htm>.

2. Lynn Olson, "States Adjust High-Stakes Testing Plans," *Education Week*, 24 January 2001, pp. 1, 18-19; and idem, "Overboard on Testing?," *Education Week*, 7 February 2001, pp. 23, 25-26, 28-30.

3. For an overview of MCAS, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/about1.html>.

4. Judith A. Dawson, *Assessment Handbook: A Guide for Developing Assessment Programs in Illinois Schools* (Springfield: Illinois Department of Education, 1995); Robert Land, "Moving Up to Complex Assessment Systems: Proceedings from the 1996 CRESST Conference," *Evaluation Comment*, 1997, pp. 1-21; National Forum on Assessment, *Principles and Indicators for Student Assessment Systems* (Cambridge, Mass.: FairTest, 1995); and Edward D. Roeber, *Designing Coordinated Assessment Systems for Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

5. Olson, "States Adjust High-Stakes Testing Plans."

6. Lynn Olson, "Testing Rules Would Grant States Leeway," *Education Week*, 6 March 2002, pp. 1, 36-37.

7. Theodore Coladarci et al., *Measured Measures: Technical Considerations for Developing a Local Assessment System* (Augusta: Maine Department of Education, 2000).

