Meeting Students Where They Are: The Role of Assessments in Fall 2020

This guidance is designed to help teachers understand students’ experiences of distance learning in spring 2020 and make curricular and instructional decisions to meet students where they are. This document is not about summative assessments for accountability; its focus is on connecting with students and formative type assessments.

As students begin school this fall, educators will have several priorities (described below) that should intersect as they consider the role of assessment.

**Priority #1: (Re)Establish Relationships**

Learning takes place in the context of relationships. Distance learning changed and sometimes interrupted these relationships. As teachers and students gather virtually or in-person, educators should attend to the relational aspect of learning to (re)establish the productive relationships that support learning. This may involve a focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These approaches support open-ended questions and deeper conversation, helping students feel safe to learn, explore, and express their ideas.

Teachers’ relational priorities may affect the methods by which they gather information about student learning. For example, in an ELA class, teachers may want to engage with students on-on-one and ask them to describe a book or passage they’ve just read to assess their...
comprehension instead of asking students to sit in front of a computer to complete an online reading test.

Priority #2: Check On Students’ Well-being
Students’ well-being is a concern in-and-of itself, and it also affects learning. Students’ circumstances may have changed significantly since they last attended school, so teachers may want to gather information about students’ well-being to understand and support students’ learning. Teachers’ understanding of trauma-informed instruction may be of particular value during this time.

Information about students’ well-being may be assessed through:
1. Conversations with students and caregivers
2. Teacher- or school-designed surveys
3. Social-Emotional assessments [Note: Many social-emotional assessments are designed to assess students’ skills in understanding, articulating, and managing their emotions and relationships. While this is important, teachers will also want to understand the conditions that affect students’ well-being.]

Questions to check on student well-being might include:
1. How are students?
2. Are students dealing with significant changes in circumstance?
3. Are there supports or connections that schools can provide or facilitate?
4. What were students’ experience of distance learning like? To what extent were they able to engage? What did they miss during distance learning? What did they like?
5. How do students feel about being back doing distance learning and/or at school?
6. Do students have concerns about face-to-face interactions?

NOTE: If students experienced technological barriers to distance learning during the spring of 2020, those barriers will likely persist into the coming school year. Districts must address digital equity and methods to engage students who do not have access; these efforts form the foundation for teachers who attempt to use assessment to meet students where they are in the fall of 2020.

Priority #3: Gather Information about Student Learning While Building Community and Engaging in Rich, Culturally-Responsive Learning Experiences
Students had and will have different experiences of distance learning. Some were highly engaged, capable of independent work, and enjoyed access to learning supports in the home. Some students had limited space, access, time, and/or support to engage effectively in distance learning. Consequently, educators may not know where to begin instruction in the fall of 2020. To effectively plan instruction, reteach when necessary, and support all students, educators may need to gather information about students’ learning at the beginning of the year.
Educators should carefully consider their purposes for assessment. Assessment is not a neutral activity. As the CRPE’s report reminds educators, assessments should “First Do No Harm.” For example, an assessment may do harm if it takes away from instructional time but doesn’t lead to supportive actions.

Therefore, we encourage educators to gather information about student learning while they engage students in rich, relevant, culturally-responsive learning experiences that build relationships and classroom community. As teachers guide these learning experiences, they can use an evaluative lens to understand students’ learning and make adjustments to curriculum and instruction if necessary.

Example: Instead of administering an interim ELA Research Performance Task (which involves no choice or interaction), an ELA teacher might engage students in a collaborative research writing project based on students’ interests. Before the project begins, the teacher might ask students about their attitudes and previous experiences regarding research and writing. These conversations build relationships because they help the teacher understand students’ histories and experiences. They also give the teacher actionable information about what kind of experiences students need to build healthy relationships with research and writing. As the project takes shape, the teacher can observe and evaluate students’ skills in context. If they learn that most students don’t know how to cite sources, they can pause to teach citation in context. If they learn that most students struggle to define and then refine a research question, they can provide scaffolding for this process in the moment and plan for the next project.

This approach differs from putting students through a battery of assessments at the beginning of the year before the learning begins. See examples for math and ELA in the links below.

**A Note on the Use of Smarter Balanced (SB) Interim Assessments for Fall 2020:**

SB interim assessments were designed to gather information about student’s progress toward the learning expected they demonstrate on the end-of-year summative assessment. They were not designed to yield diagnostic information for individual students. Some characteristics of the Interim Comprehensive Assessments (ICAs), such as the non-adaptive nature, the limited number of the items, and the sampling of those items, will mean that ICA scores will not give a complete picture of a student’s skills and conceptual understandings. In addition, interims do not assess specific skills or knowledge outside the standards, which may be central to the curriculum. As a result, interims cannot answer specific questions a teacher might have about what students know and can do before a course begins. Teachers should consider the crucial skills and knowledge that students normally have and look for evidence of these skills and knowledge in the context of rich learning experiences that build classroom community and attend to SEL and CRT. Educators should consider forms of assessment other than interims (described below) to support student strengths and skills:

**Examples in Math**

**Examples in ELA**