

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North Carolina has long been a leader in education innovation and is poised to lead in early elementary school reform through a new plan to develop and implement a developmentally appropriate formative assessment process for Kindergarten through third grade.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN K-3

In response to a mandate by the North Carolina State Legislature and the requirements of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant, NC Superintendent June Atkinson convened the K-3 Assessment Think Tank which included NC school teachers, parents, scholars representing seven NC universities, and additional stakeholders. The group was charged with proposing a plan to improve early elementary school learning and instruction through more efficient and effective use of student-centered assessments. Over a nine-month period, the Think Tank reviewed scientific findings and best practices and solicited input from a wide array of stakeholders, including a survey of over 2,500 NC teachers and consultation from over 60 state and national scholars and education leaders. This report summarizes the Think Tank's findings, its proposal for an innovative process to improve learning, and its recommendations for next steps.

BACKGROUND

From kindergarten entry through third grade, the **early elementary school years represent a pivotal period in educational development.** Achievement gaps that grow during the years prior to kindergarten are either solidified or eliminated during the primary grades of elementary school (Graves, 2006; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004). Education policy must increase its emphasis on student learning during this critical period in a way that recognizes each child's developmental needs.

In order to optimize student learning, teachers need to utilize a **formative assessment process that identifies strengths and areas for growth for each student in five domains of learning.** This process is already used by master teachers and has been shown to improve learning outcomes (Black & William, 1998; William & Thompson, 2007). This process of assessment for learning and development must attend to the whole child, including the child's culture, family, health, and early childhood experiences. This assessment should be an integral part of the instruction and learning process.

Input from North Carolina teachers indicates that they are willing and able to implement a formative assessment process, provided they are given resources to strengthen, support, and guide them. The implementation plan must include professional development, coaching, and support from leadership.

PROPOSAL FOR ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN K-3

The Think Tank proposes a formative assessment process that engages teachers and students with input from parents and families, school support staff, early childhood programs, and health care providers. This assessment process will incorporate multiple forms of evidence, such as observations, student work samples, conversations, and embedded instructional tasks. It is intended to be ongoing and an integral part of the instructional and learning process that teachers and students use to guide teaching and learning. It will be based on claims about student learning in five inter-related domains of learning included in North Carolina's definition of school readiness (Ready for School Goal Team, 2000): **Approaches to Learning, Cognitive Development, Emotional-Social Development, Health and Physical Development, Language Development and Communication.**

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Think Tank anticipates that the formative assessment process will lead to improved learning for all children provided the following recommendations are implemented:

1. A Design Team should be established to craft learning progressions, performance descriptors, assessment targets, and assessment means to transform the Think Tank's claims into an assessment that will be a usable instructional and learning resource. The Design Team shall meet with the Think Tank in September 2014 for an update on progress.
2. Design a pilot process that includes a representative sample of students from schools across diverse regions of the state to ensure that it will be accessible to and valid and appropriate for the greatest number of children.
3. Devise strategies to ensure that major stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, health care providers, and early childhood leaders, are an integral part of the design and implementation process.
4. Utilize technology to support the assessment process and to facilitate data collection and utilization.
5. Work collaboratively with LEAs to plan and deliver professional development that is consistent with research; this should include demonstration, practice, feedback, coaching, and ongoing support.

Professional development will be critical, not only for teachers, but also for administrators, curriculum specialist, coaches, and others who support teachers in the formative assessment process.

6. Provide both human and technical resources that are sufficient to strengthen, support, and guide teachers and students as they collaborate in the formative assessment process.
7. Following a validation pilot, implement the assessment process statewide in a carefully sequenced manner that ensures sufficient monitoring and supervision to ensure quality and fidelity in the process.
8. Design the K-3 formative assessment to achieve its purpose – to inform teaching and learning on a daily basis. It will not be designed for accountability or high-stakes purposes, nor will it be a valid means of evaluating teachers or schools or for accountability purposes.
9. Devise systems and structures to ensure iterative improvement cycles that increase the usability and effectiveness of the formative assessment process in the future.

CLAIMS

The Think Tank proposes the following claims, or learning goals, as the foundation for the formative assessment process:

Approaches to Learning

1. Students can effectively solve problems by defining goals, describing steps, and evaluating alternative strategies in both academic and social interactions.
2. Students can maintain focus and persevere to accomplish collaborative and individual tasks whether those tasks are chosen by them, or assigned to them.
3. Students can demonstrate curiosity by seeking opportunities – whether independently or in collaboration with peers and teachers – to extend their knowledge.

Cognitive Development

1. Students can use content-independent abilities and strategies as well as content-specific skills, processes, and approaches to solve problems and acquire information.
2. Students can make connections to learning, construct knowledge, and demonstrate their understanding using multiple modes of expression.
3. Students can come to understand themselves as learners and acquire dispositions (attitudes, beliefs, and values) that support their academic engagement.

Emotional-Social Development

1. Students can identify and communicate about emotions in themselves and others.
2. Students can talk about and use strategies to regulate responses to their own emotions.
3. Students can form and sustain healthy relationships with adults and peers.
4. Students can use appropriate social skills to interact with adults and peers in school.

Health & Physical Development

1. Students can demonstrate conceptual knowledge to support healthy behaviors and the reduction of health risks.
2. Students can develop skills that contribute to healthy behaviors and reduction of health risks.
3. Students can demonstrate competencies in motor skills and movement patterns.

Language Development & Communication

1. Students can use and continue to develop effective listening and communication skills (e.g. verbal and non-verbal) for a range of purposes, audiences, and settings/contexts in increasingly complex ways.
2. Students can acquire and integrate vocabulary, concepts, and the structure of language in increasingly complex ways.
3. Students can acquire the foundational skills for reading and integrate these skills for comprehending increasingly complex texts.
4. Students can acquire the written communication skills that empower students to express their ideas, opinions, and knowledge for a range of purposes and audiences.

CONCLUSION

Understanding what children know and are able to do is critical to teachers' efforts to plan instruction that meets the needs of all children. The Think Tank strongly encourages the Department of Public Instruction to design an assessment process for use in kindergarten through third grade that utilizes strategies appropriate for young children and occurs in the context of instruction and learning. This provides the best opportunity for children to demonstrate what they know and are able to do and to help each child reach challenging and achievable goals that contribute to his/her ongoing development and learning.

