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The Disconnect Between College and Reality

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The disconnect between college and reality

With formative assessments, teachers can more accurately determine student interests and aptitudes and drive achievement.

K-12 teachers straddle the proverbial fence between idealistic and realistic when they try to apply what they learned in college to contemporary classrooms filled with high-stakes testing pressures. There's a disconnect between textbooks that espouse best practice and the reality facing K-12 teachers. The test-pressurized atmosphere smothers teacher creativity, stifles student interests, and perpetuates societal injustices on students of diverse backgrounds.

The education community must find new measures that will increase student learning, not just document it.

Novice teachers don't have an effective template to cope with the pressures they face in public school classrooms. The educational research community may support formative assessment, but, in schools across the nation, teachers hear a message that state and national assessments are far more important than classroom assessments or student-centered instruction, which often requires time-consuming investigations, such as field trips, hands-on activities, or problem-based learning. Understandably, many teachers relinquish the best practices they learned in preservice programs.

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Real classrooms

Going forward, educators will need better preparation before entering classrooms, where school leaders and administrators expect every teacher to multitask in an overcrowded, diverse classroom where they must document increased student learning for state measures and teacher evaluations.

For example, in one year, students required to take the state assessment in math, science, social studies, or English in any typical high school in Virginia take up to seven major tests (three benchmarks, midterm and final exams, and pre and post tests), which leaves little time for creative formative assessments and student-centered instruction. A complicating factor is that students are routinely removed from a variety of classes for remediation and retesting in other subjects. Consequently, less-motivated students become discouraged by the system's preoccupation with standardized testing.

In contrast, formative assessments foster student-teacher interactions that have demonstrated significant learning. These measurements are based on relationships cultivated over time in the classroom and are far more accurate gauges of cognitive growth. Teachers are obligated to monitor students' individual learning based on a variety of factors never considered on a standardized test.

Formative assessments let teachers give students immediate feedback on their performance. They include authentic assessments, portfolios, student-led conferences, and surveys, which allow us to identify learning needs and give students time to reflect on their learning. These practices infuse assessment throughout the

learning process rather than limit the evaluation of learning to an end product.

Formative assessment is particularly effective in establishing rapport and determining individual student needs. Students are more motivated to learn and more involved in the formative assessment process. This is due to the clear expectations many formative assessments establish at the outset. Checklists, graphic organizers, and learning logs establish prior knowledge and tell us about students' areas of interest. Formative assessments also spur students to become self-directed learners by instilling the critical thought component necessary to analyze and inform their own instruction. Used this way, formative assessments reshape knowledge through learning and reflection and become an instrument of instruction for teacher and student. Each of us has seen formative assessment rekindle student learning and achievement.

Formative assessment also plays an important role in making teaching more culturally relevant. Simply implementing more testing for students — many of whom are already at risk — does nothing but push them out the door into the world without preparing them with the skills they'll need once they get there.

The education community must find new measures that will increase student learning, not just document it. We accept that standardized testing will remain part of schooling, but we need to allow teachers freedom to use the characteristics of formative assessment to evaluate students as individuals, which will ultimately result in increased student achievement. **◀**