



Effective Formative Assessment: Common Instructional Checks

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In many classrooms in the United States, a vicious cycle occurs daily that goes like this: Students are presented material and tested on that material, and then are presented new material and tested on the new material. And the cycle continues. Students soon learn how to “play school,” meaning to study for short-term memory results, take the test, drop that material from the mind and repeat the same mental process for the new material. Thus, they get good grades but do not really learn.

Given this background and our school district’s mission to “provide meaningful and engaging work in the pursuit of profound learning” (“profound” meaning learned in one situation and able to be applied in a different situation), we set off to develop a process to overcome the practice of “playing school” and truly pursue profound learning. To begin, the leadership design team, made up of the district’s principals and central office administrators, set out to develop a process that addressed the following two questions:

- How do we get students to retain essential standards at each grade level?
- How do we continually improve with even more students performing at above standard?

In large group discussions, items were generated that probably had many reference points, but two books especially contained information that served as the driving force. *Brain Matters* by Pat Wolfe generally stated that students were good at short-term memorization, which is used for tests, but needed elaborative rehearsal to get into long-term memory.

Permission to Forget by Lee Jenkins stated it this way: “The essential skills had to be constantly reviewed to be retained; otherwise, teachers would have to constantly re-teach the essential skills.”

Thus, we established that we first needed to identify the essential standards. Teachers collaborated on identifying these standards, which were drawn from the state standards and aligned across grade levels. Third-grade teachers worked with second and fourth-grade teachers to ensure alignment of standards and that the standards were, in fact, absolutely essential for success at the next level. We identified six essential skills in reading and six in math for each grade level. These essential standards were the heart of the evolving process.



Next, drawing from Madeline Hunter’s language of “checking for understanding,” we developed a system of common instructional checks (CIC)—a process for teaching and assessing to monitor progress toward mastery of the essential standards. In our pilot building, this system involved teaching in the way we always had—sequentially—but to give quick tests at the end of every week on the 12 standards, regardless of whether the standard had been introduced or taught.

Results were graphed by the students each week using a color-coded bar graph. Each test consisted of one question on each standard. A core of 50% or below was red, 50-80% was yellow, and above 80% was green. The bar on the graph would have X number of red squares filled in, with X number of yellow squares filled in on top of those and finally X number of green squares on top of the yellow ones. The initial hope was that students would see their weekly progress as the red portion shrank and the green portion grew.

This was a motivating activity for the students, who wanted to do better as a class every week. And, as time passed, students doing well helped the other students because they wanted an entirely green bar. The teachers used the benchmark of 80% or better for three consecutive weeks as an indicator of mastery. That did not relieve the students meeting that benchmark from taking the test, but it did mean a lower instructional emphasis on the essential standards and the students moving on to new material.

After implementing CICs for two years, the school noticed most students achieved mastery of the essential standards by winter break, allowing the teachers to move quickly to new material after break with the confidence the students had the foundation to succeed.

Two variations on this system occurred when implemented in other buildings. One variation was to test math standards every other week, and English and reading standards the other alternating weeks, with two questions per standard. Graphing was done in the same manner. The other variation was to only test the standards that had been taught and to add questions to the quizzes as standards were introduced.

The interesting outcome was that regardless of which approach was used, students mastered and retained the essential standards. Amazingly, the standards were better retained than before implementation, and scores on state standardized tests continued to increase, as did results on local measures.



Today, evolution of this program has continued in our school district. All K-6 buildings are using one of the three systems. Our district is organized around three, 60-instructional-day trimesters, and the district administers a summative assessment at the end of each trimester to provide buildings with feedback and comparative data. Additionally, a large bank of questions for each standard is available electronically for teachers, so the CIC can be quickly developed and is always different. Finally, we are expanding our use of CICs to summer work to address the issue of summer learning loss.

Results of the past two years are extremely encouraging. We now have data from state, national and local tests that teachers can use to quickly adjust instruction to improve learning. Significant gains are being made on all measures of achievement.