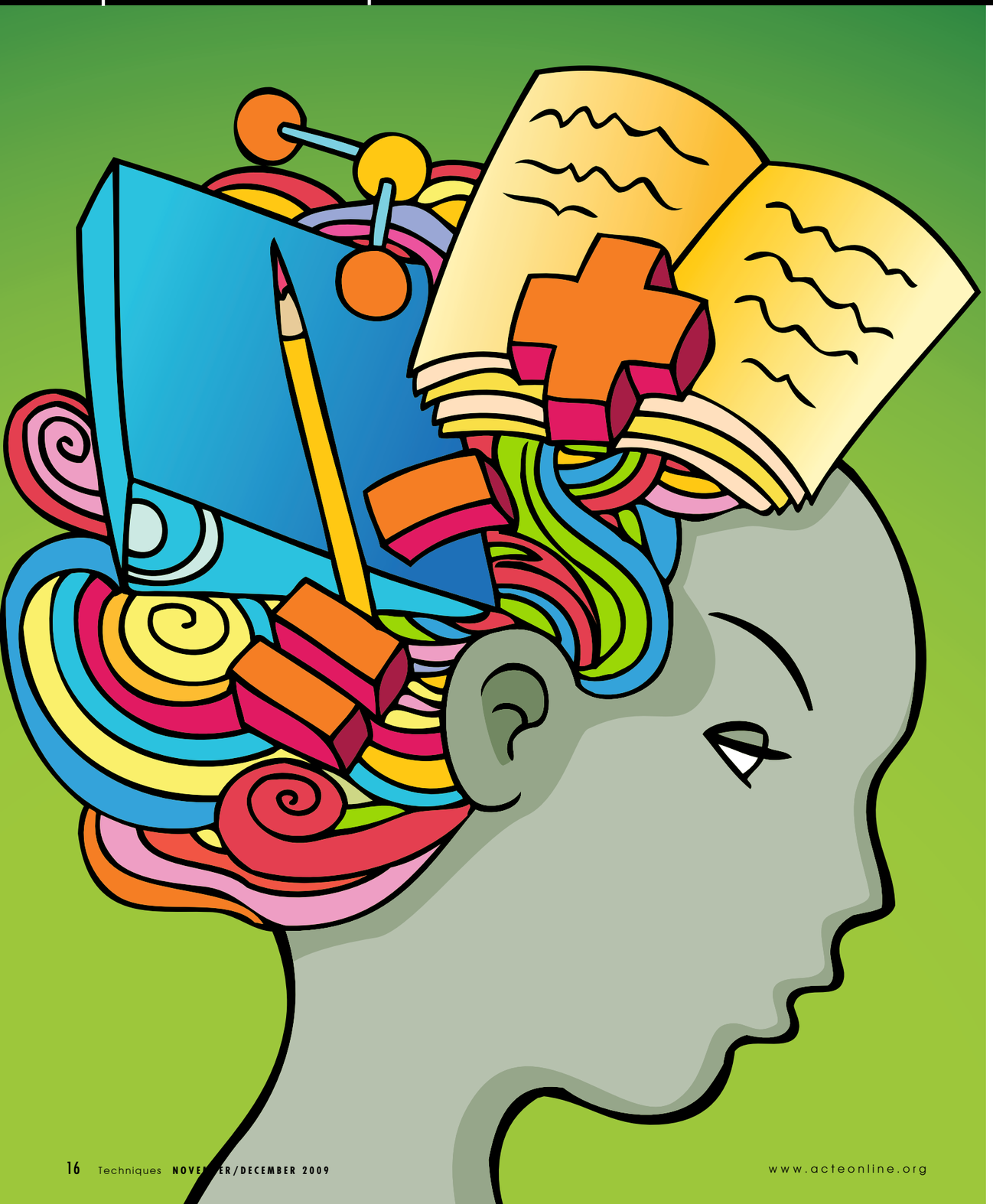

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ASSESSING THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

BY SUSAN REESE

Assessment: an appraisal; an official determination of value. The dictionary definitions may seem simple and clear, but when inserted into the complex field of education, assessment becomes anything but simple. There are summative assessments, formative assessments, interim assessments, diagnostic assessments, predictive assessments and benchmarking. For career and technical education (CTE) teachers, there are often also industry skill standards assessments. It's complicated enough just sorting out the terms, and then a teacher has to figure out which of them will actually work.

Federal policy dictates certain assessments such as the high-stakes testing done to meet the accountability standards of No Child Left Behind. Is this the best way to assess what our students are learning? Recently, the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) issued a policy brief questioning whether federal education policy simply needs refining, or "should it be flipped on its head." In "Reinventing the Federal Role in Education: Supporting the Goal of College and Career Readiness for All Students," AEE notes that, under the current federal education policy, "proficient" is defined and measured through more than 50 sets of state standards and assessments. In future policy, suggests AEE, college and career readiness should be defined and measured by a set of common standards and assessments aligned to college and career readiness, and graduation rates should be defined and calculated commonly.

ASSESSMENT:
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In the Classroom

Classroom teachers, including those in CTE, utilize both summative and formative assessments in their classrooms. Summative assessments can be given at any time to determine what students have learned; therefore, they can be standardized tests, final exams, or tests given at some point during the year to measure students' knowledge against content standards. Summative assessments usually result in a standardized test score, a number or a letter grade. They serve a purpose, but they are often the only thing that comes to mind for policymakers, parents and other stakeholders when it comes to assessments. On the front lines of education—and education research—the value of formative assessments is more clearly understood and appreciated.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) defines formative assessment as "a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended learning outcomes." Formative assessments are part of the classroom instructional process and serve to help the student and the teacher know where the student is in the learning process, and what skills and knowledge he or she still needs to acquire. They usually do not result in a grade, but help determine the next steps to be taken by the student and teacher. Summative assessments are often referred to as "assessments *of* learning," while formative assessments are called "assessments *for* learning."

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

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INTERIM ASSESSMENT

[is] the suggested term for the assessment that falls between formative and summative, including medium-scale, medium-cycle assessments. Interim assessments may be instructional, evaluative or predictive.

In AEE's publication *Meaningful Measurement*, Judy Wurtzel of the Aspen Institute and Marianne Perie, Scott Marion and Brian Gong of the National Center for the Improvement of Education Assessment define interim assessment as the suggested term for the assessment that falls between formative and summative, including medium-scale, medium-cycle assessments. Interim assessments may be instructional, evaluative or predictive. They note that the interim assessment has "considerable intuitive appeal," but there is no research base to show that interim assessments improve student learning.

They recommend the use of interim assessment systems designed to increase teachers' ability to do formative assessments. Structure and professional development should help teachers learn how to embed assessment within a learning activity, provide corrective feedback and modify instruction to meet students' needs. "Over the long term," the authors say, "the focus of assessment efforts can move from interim assessment to the formative assessment practices that research suggests have the most payoff for student learning."

In their chapter on formative assessments in *Meaningful Measurement*, Jan Chappuis, Stephen Chappuis and Richard Stiggins of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Assessment Training Institute note that an effective formative assessment has a clear purpose, clear targets and sound design. It includes effective communication by teachers who manage assessment results well and communicate them effectively to all stakeholders; it also includes student involvement as teachers actively engage their students in generating, interpreting and acting on their own assessment information. The three authors address education policy and practice that lead to a steady diet of ready-made external tests and argue that this will not bring about the gains in student achievement promised by formative assessment practices. "The greatest value in formative assessment lies in teachers and students making use of results to improve real-time teaching and learning at every turn," they state.

Formative assessments are certainly a vital component of CTE—in the classrooms and labs and other training facilities—because CTE educators measure not only what their students have learned academically, but also the hands-on skills they will need in the workplace.

Assessing the Assessments

Among its resources, the College Board has published content standards for middle and high school English language arts and mathematics and statistics, including ReadiStep, a low-stakes middle school assessment. According to the College Board, the elements that make this a good assessment tool are a user-friendly format, early feedback, flexible and easy administration, comprehensive and timely results, and alignment with state standards.

"A valuable educational assessment provides more than a score; it provides insight," says Kristopher John, executive director for College Readiness Product Development at the College Board. "Feedback from the assessment needs to be specific and constructive, so it can be acted on. With ReadiStep, our goal is to support connecting the assessment results to instruction." Those are some of the ways the College Board defines the content and makeup of a valuable assessment, but what do others say?

ETS offers a directory of assessment tools and their features on its Web site; however, ETS suggests in its second paper in its series on accountability, "A Culture of Evidence II: Critical Features of Assessments for Postsecondary Student Learning," that the appropriate place to start a discussion about assessing student learning is not with the selection of an assessment tool, but by asking questions such as: "What kinds of statements would we like to be able to make about students' learning. What evidence of student learning do we already have (*e.g.* portfolios), and what conclusions can be drawn from these data? What inferences about student learning can we draw from existing evidence, and how can we support and supplement these inferences with data from new assessments?"

In ETS's "Winter 2009 Policy Notes," Drew Gitomer with ETS's Center for the Study of Teacher Assessment noted that ETS is developing assessments known as cognitively-based assessments for learning (CBAL), which build on cognitive-science research about how learners achieve proficiency. In a new and improved assessment regime, says Gitomer, tests would not only document students' learning and help teachers improve their instruction, but the tests themselves would also offer worthwhile educational experiences. The "next frontier" in testing, says ETS, may lie in assessing "the noncognitive skills that influence success in college and the workplace," for example, persistence, integrity, leadership and motivation.

Learning from the Success of Others

In our global economy, there is a growing call to measure students' achievement not only against that of others in our own nation, but against others internationally; our career tech students will be faced with entering a workforce that must be able to compete globally. The International Benchmarking Advisory Group, which was convened by the National Governors Association, CCSSO, and Achieve, released the report, "Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education." The report includes a number of recommendations, including the leveraging of states' collective influence to ensure that textbooks, digital media, curricula and assessments are aligned to internationally benchmarked standards, and that they draw on lessons from high-performing nations.

So do we now really have to measure our students against the world? According to the report, the answer is yes, as it notes, "Technological, economic and political trends have combined to increase demand for higher skills while heightening competition for quality jobs. Rule-bound jobs on factory floors and in offices are being automated and outsourced. The world's knowledge-and-innovation economy favors workers who have postsecondary education or training, strong fundamental skills in math and reading, and the ability to solve unfamiliar problems and communicate effectively."

The advisory group found that top-performing countries administer assessments that are more rigorous and better aligned with standards than the tests U.S. students typically take. The textbooks they use are just one example cited, since researchers have found that U.S. textbooks are "less aligned with standards and much less focused and coherent in the topics they cover" when compared to those used in high-performing places, such as Singapore.

The report suggests that states should work with commercial publishers to ensure that their concerns and expectations about textbooks, digital media and other instructional materials are being addressed by the industry. Another recommendation is for states to pool resources to develop entirely new tools, such as assessments that align with internationally benchmarked standards. And finally, the advisory group notes that, "Some research indicates that countries are pursuing a wide range of strategies and

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goals to encourage the use of computers and information technology for instruction, suggesting that there might be much to learn in this area from international benchmarking."

A Team Effort

In its March 2009 Strategic Initiatives Discussion Document, "Transforming Education: Delivering on Our Promise to Every Child," CCSSO identifies one of the needed changes as "a new generation of standards and assessment capable of driving a world-class system of education through a rich multidimensional accountability system and redefining what it means to be a high school graduate."

The CCSSO document also supports practices already being employed by some career tech educators—learning teams and project-based learning. It suggests, "New instructional delivery systems can be created that group and regroup students, educators and others in learning environments with context and content that are collectively meaningful," and adds, "Teaming is also a powerful way to support project-based learning, in which learners collaborate on complex tasks in real-world contexts to investigate and solve problems in hands-on environments."

A final important team member is the student, and he or she should not be overlooked in the assessment process. Rick Stiggins and Jan Chappuis of ETS note in their paper, "Using Student-Involved Classroom Assessment to Close Achievement Gaps," that "Students' decisions about their academic capabilities are formulated on the basis of classroom assessment evidence.

In contexts where wide gaps appear in test score results between and among different subgroups of the student population, the chances are high that low performers have judged themselves to be incapable of succeeding." They propose the use of the student-involved classroom to turn the students' thinking in a more positive direction. "The evidence reveals," they write, "that there is no question about what will happen to their achievement and score gaps when we do so."

Helping students achieve their highest potential should be the goal of any educational tool, and assessments are another way for teachers to gain insight into where their students are along their educational journeys, and what they need to do to make those journeys end in a successful career. As the College Board's Kristopher John explains quite succinctly, "There are many types of assessment, but regardless of the type, the value of the assessment is in the information it provides. Good assessments support informed decision making." T

For Further Assessment

To learn more about the organizations cited in this article, visit these Web sites.

Alliance for Excellent Education
www.all4ed.org

College Board
www.collegeboard.com

Council of Chief State School Officers
www.ccsso.org

Educational Testing Service
www.ets.org

National Center for the Improvement of Education Assessment
www.nciea.org

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