By Susan Reese

Assessments: 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.

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 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.

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.

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 Assessment, Judy Wurtzfeld of the Aspen Institute and Marianne Perie, Scott Marion and Brian Gosing 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 assessment is the term now in use for 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 Assessment, 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 and share them with parents and students, and with the students themselves. It includes student involvement as active participants 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 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, that influence success in college and the workplace, such as: “What kinds of statements would start a discussion about assessing student learning? What evidence of 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 its series on accountability, “A Culinary Math

Our materials focus on the technical skills that are necessary for students to achieve a high level of performance in the workplace.

Resources are available for instructors who provide a wealth of information and curriculum flexibility.

Choose the quality that many professionals in the field, and in the classroom, have known for years... American Tech!

Take Your Students To A Higher Level

Students To A

Visit us at booth #216

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2009

Techniques

www.acteonline.org

www.acteonline.org

November/December 2009

Techniques

19

18

Techniques

November/December 2009

www.acteonline.org

www.acteonline.org

November/December 2009

Techniques

19

18
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 redesigning 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.”

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
National Governors Association
www.nga.org

A Valuable Educational Assessment Provides More Than a Score; It Provides Insight.