

# Assessment Guide

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Quick Insight and Tips for Getting the Most out of Your  
Assessments

SunGard® K-12 Education  
2014

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## Thank You!

Thanks for downloading our Assessment Guide. We hope you find it useful, please feel free to share it with your colleagues. Visit <http://sungardK12.com/blog/> for more insight.

To learn more about how to increase both individual student and overall district achievement with PerformancePLUS, visit <http://www.sungardK12.com/Lead> to have a SunGard K-12 Education representative contact you.

## **Formative Assessment Trends: The Common Core**

Recent changes to the Common Core curriculum have increased the rigor of education in classrooms around the country. As this trend continues, it has become more important than ever to understand what students know and are able to do. This can be achieved with formative assessment practices.

Researchers have found that it is vital to extract meaningful trends and information as it relates to the Common Core. This prepares students with the knowledge and abilities not only for scoring well on tests, but also for ensuring college and career success.

*Common Formative Assessments: How to Connect Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment* (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006) states that by varying the type of formative assessment used over the course of the school week, teachers will receive a more accurate and complete picture of students' comprehension. This is described by Ainsworth and Viegut as a "multiple-measure assessment 'window' into student understanding." Studies such as this show that formative assessment is a powerful tool for the improvement of student learning. Gathering, interpreting, and acting on information throughout the students' learning process, rather than afterward, plays a critical role in tracking successful and unsuccessful patterns in both teaching and learning. In this way learning gaps, academic progress, information absorption, strategic course corrections, and other critical elements of learning can be evaluated and applied toward future processes.

## **Four Reasons Performance-Based Tasks Make Excellent Formative Assessments**

A new whitepaper by SunGard K-12 Education shared four reasons why performance-based formative assessment not only guides instruction but also is an effective part of the student learning process. Recent research by Jan and Steve Chappuis of the Assessment Training Institute found these learning/assessment tools:

1. **Provide Near Immediate Feedback to Students** - During performance-based formative assessments, teachers can “assess each step of the project, redirect as needed, and check for understanding.” By providing prompt feedback, these types of formative assessments allow students to more easily answer three questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?
2. **Offer Deeper Evaluations** - “Some students struggle more with ‘sit and get’ learning; for those students, creative, smaller, or hands-on tasks may better allow them to illustrate their understanding.” These tasks engage them in deeper evaluations through exploration, investigation, and action.
3. **Create Student-Centered Evaluation and Learning** - In student-centered evaluation, students can act as group leaders, research for themselves, and teach each other—all of which frees the teacher to observe, make anecdotal notes, and plan future instruction.
4. **Serve as Practice for Students** - These types of assessments “serve as practice for students, just like a meaningful homework assignment does.”

By allowing teachers to gather, interpret, and act on information throughout the students’ learning process, formative assessment plays a critical role in tracking successful and unsuccessful patterns in both teaching and learning. For more insights, download the full white paper at:

<http://www.eschoolnews.com/2014/02/26/12-creative-ways-give-formative-assessments/>

## Four Big Ideas about Assessment

From FETC session, titled “If You Hate Assessment, You’re Doing It Wrong,” by **Dean Shareski**, community manager for Discovery Education Canada.

Shareski, a former teacher of first through eighth grades and currently an instructor for pre-service teachers at University of Regina, began his presentation by asking, “How do you define learning?”

“We are in the business of learning, and yet we have a hard time defining exactly what it is,” he said. “And that’s not because we’re not bright people. It’s because it’s a really hard question. If you make the answer really simple, I think you’re missing something. It should be a difficult question. It should be a question that we ask ourselves and each other all the time.”

Shareski went on to make the point that if learning is complex then we should not expect assessment to be simple. He then challenged educators to begin to think differently about assessment. “Assessment is not a spreadsheet,” he said. “It’s a conversation.” And for Shareski, the assessment conversation starts with doing a better job of documenting learning.

To do that, Shareski emphasized “four big ideas that really turn the tables and change assessment from something we don’t like to something we actually enjoy.”

1. **Self/Peer Assessment** - “If we believe that assessment is embedded in the learning, then we can’t say [the students] own all the learning and [the teacher] owns all the assessment,” he said. “We need to figure out a way to make our students more part of that process.” Shareski offered a couple of suggestions for drawing students into the process:
  - **Make the notion of social learning integral to the learning process** - “I argue that every teacher, from kindergarten on, should ask their students these two questions: What did you learn from others? What did you contribute to the learning of others?” he said. By establishing the expectation that students should contribute to the class’s understanding, students will begin to pay attention to others around them and start thinking about who they can learn from.
  - **Students choose weighting** - After setting some guidelines, Shareski typically gives students a five to ten percent leeway for the weighting of assessments of their learning. “Having that choice makes a very big difference for them,” he says.

- **Have students grade themselves** - Calling it a “really interesting process,” Shareski suggested having students document their learning and grade themselves. By doing that, educators can help students develop an essential tool for life-long learning.
2. **Put Technology to Work** - Shareski encouraged educators to put technology to work to “capture the learning so that we can look back and reflect on it.” Photo and videos are just two ways for students to document their learning. He also shared that he uses the “secret” email address in Evernote to allow students to send their mid-term assessments to him. In these assessments, he asks his students to share what they’ve learned, what they’re struggling with, what they’re feeling good about, and how he can better support them. Shareski then responds vocally to their observations through a feature in Evernote. He says the recording makes it easy to share feedback and that the recording more accurately conveys both the message and emotion of his feedback.
  3. **Make It Matter** - Shareski emphasized that “simply taking their work and saying we’re going to share this work with other people changes the game.” He encouraged educators to think of the world as our refrigerator. Document classwork on YouTube. Share pictures on Flickr. Create a blog. “We need to put value on the work,” he said. “[By doing this, you respond] to the question, ‘Why do I have to learn this?’”
  4. **Model** - Educators should model metacognition for their students. “We do have to model what this looks like,” he says. “This can’t be something we just ask kids to do.” Talk about your learning. Make it part of the everyday classroom experience. By doing that, it will become part of the student’s everyday experience —both inside and outside the classroom.

Visit Shareski’s blog, *Ideas and Thoughts: Learning Stuff Since 1964* for more insights about teaching and learning. <http://ideasandthoughts.org/category/assessment/>

## **Three Steps to Overcoming the Challenges of Student Assessment**

Report card grades are only a small part of K-12 student evaluation. To wholly appraise a student, gathering, interpreting, and acting on insights about their performance plays a critical role in tracking successful and unsuccessful patterns in teaching and learning. Research spanning four decades has proven formative assessment to be a powerful ally for improving student performance and differentiating instruction.

The only way to know if a secondary math lab or additional reading class is providing an optimal learning experience is through assessment. For educators to maximize evaluation effectiveness, consider the following:

1. **Embrace Change** - To more easily transition to the Common Core States Standards, many school districts have begun revamping their curriculum offerings. Reach out to your department head to get the necessary resources and information to begin implementing positive change into your classroom.
2. **Explain the Process** - There's methodology behind the new rigorous standards. Be sure to explain to children what they'll learn and why they are learning it, and keep parents informed as well. Work with your colleagues to achieve this goal.
3. **Align Assessments and Curriculum** - To meet Common Core objectives, curriculum should be constantly reviewed and updated. Evaluations must be designed to achieve this end. If applicable, consider modeling appropriate classroom tests after state exams.

The optimal challenge for today's educator is to accomplish increased performance scrutiny while continuing to foster a love of learning—this while taking into consideration each child's unique needs. However, all of these objectives may be accomplished with the right practices and tools.

## Formative Assessments: A Performance Check-Up

During an *eSchool News* webinar sponsored by SunGard K-12 Education, experts took a deep dive into formative assessments to highlight this tool that has proven a powerful ally for improving student performance and differentiating instruction. The panel was moderated by **Joel Hames**, SunGard K-12 director of product management, and featured **Bethany Silver, Ph.D.**—director of assessment, evaluation, and research of the Bloomfield Public School District, Conn.—and **John Phillip, Ph.D.**, founder and executive director of the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology. Read the insights from our panelists below.

### Formative Assessment is a Process

Joel Hames emphasized that formative assessment is a process, not just a “thing that you do” and detailed the following four primary attributes of the process:

1. **Clarify intended learning** - Hames said that formative assessment describes “your learning targets in student-friendly language, something that they can grab on to and understand what the finishing line looks like. What are they supposed to get to?”
2. **Elicit evidence** - The evidence of student learning goes far beyond test papers. “It’s all the obtrusive and unobtrusive interactions you have with students in which you look at the work that they do, sit next to them, and provide that direct feedback,” said Hames. “It’s how they show understanding of their competency, their mastery of a concept through any number of different avenues.”
3. **Interpret evidence** - Educators must then interpret the evidence. “Understand what it means in the context of that student’s experience. The learning target itself,” Hames said. “How strong was your observation when you elicited the evidence? Does that connect well with interpreting and understanding where they are?”
4. **Act on that evidence** - “How do you move the student forward?” asked Hames. “What kind of feedback are you giving them to improve what they are trying to achieve.”

### Tips for Integrating Formative Assessment in the Curriculum, Classroom

“Formative assessment really is the very air we breathe in a classroom,” says Bethany Silver. “It’s that active, that engaged and [the point at which] students are learning effectively.”

Bloomfield Public School has adopted SunGard K-12’s curriculum mapping software, CurriculumCONNECTOR, to support the transition from state standards to the Common Core

State Standards. The software, Silver says, supports formative assessment by archiving evidence of student learning. “[CurriculumCONNECTOR] has just exploded the possibilities in our district in terms of making the curriculum dynamic, in making it accessible to all our staff,” she says. “And, it’s just so exciting. We’re able to upload artifacts, examples of student work, rubrics, look-fors, etc., that teachers can really use to guide the student experience and that can really help shape the formative assessment process.”

“When we bring our curriculum into our classroom, all the strategies that we’re using should be in service to the intended learning. And, formative assessment is one of our strategies that guide the learning experience,” says Silver. “Make the demonstration of learning evidence clear and well-aligned to the intended learning—that’s how formative assessment can support that curriculum implementation.”

In the classroom, Silver said formative assessment happens in the “teaching moment” and offered some examples:

- **Text What You’ve Learned by Sarah Brown Wessling** - At the beginning of class, students answer an introductory question by texting their response to Poll Everywhere. Wessling then projects those answers on the white board so students have an opportunity to share what they’ve learned and see what others have learned. Wessling then drops those responses into a word cloud generator.
- **Quick Write** - Students provide a 15-word summary, 50-word summary, or a 100-word summary of the key point of the homework assignment, etc. They then can engage in a Think-Pair-Share and based on that, the teacher will develop an understanding of where today’s lesson needs to start.

Silver noted that students should lead or partner in the interpretation of learning evidence. “It’s a very, very rich opportunity for students to understand how others are interpreting the curriculum and to broaden learners’ experience with that curriculum,” she said. “You are distributing that learning process and building an ownership of the learning between all of the students in the classroom—having them not only collaborate with you, but also having them collaborate with one another to build a true learning environment. And, that’s all done through the process of formative assessment.”

### **Good Processes Need Good Tools**

John R. Phillip, Ph.D. —the founder and executive director of the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology, which assists schools and universities in linking 21st-century educational reforms with the effective use of information technology—emphasized that “a good process needs good tools.” “I worry a lot about whether the teachers have those tools,” he said. “We need some easy-to-use tools that help us with this inventory of learning. Because if I see evidence of effectiveness, I don’t have time to type that all in.”

Phillip emphasized that formative assessment needs to “really change” the curriculum.

“The curriculum guide is really an important document. But, sadly it’s also the most static document. What is going to happen with formative assessment is that is now going to have to become a living, breathing, organic document,” he said. “Formative assessment illustrates learner progress and provides teachers with the data necessary to footnote the curriculum ... and we can do that in real time. Then we’re making the curriculum used and useful and visible based on student evidence.”

Phillip believes the two-way exchange between curriculum and formative assessment isn’t as robust as it should be. “Right now, sadly, formative assessment is an island over here. And, we need to help pull some of that data together,” he says.

He suggested the following as elements of effective formative assessment system/process:

- Help communicate the same information in a consistent and easy format to all stakeholders.
- Leverage the home-school portal for communicating formative assessment results to parents.

SunGard K-12 Education’s PerformancePLUS (<http://sungardK12.com/PerformancePLUS>) software suite includes a proven assessment solution which can be paired with a curriculum management system to provide a holistic view of **both** assessment and curriculum.

## More Info

For more info on assessment, best practices, tips and tricks, check out our blog:

<http://sungardk12.com/blog>

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