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Speaking Out
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Can We Get Back to Teaching? Kyle Rhoads

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The question above is what I heard a third-grade teacher exclaim after a recent round of standardized testing. Teachers and principals across the country are all asking similar questions, especially as the pressure from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Race to the Top initiative, state standards, and the business world continues to mount.

But can we really get back to teaching? Yes, but it won't happen because the high-stakes testing disappears. Rather, it will begin when we commit to assessing for learning at the classroom level. I am sure many teachers and principals agree that the federal initiatives of the past two administrations have led to the overemphasis on standardized testing to measure the performance of students, teachers, and schools across America. I would not disagree, but I urge you to ask yourself, How did we get to this point?

Shifting Focus

In many classrooms, testing of all types continues to determine grades, to decide which students are successful, and to group students by ability. We must shift the emphasis and use what we know about effective teaching and learning. As educators, we must commit to using our testing opportunities in classrooms to evaluate what students know and are able to do and use the information (data) to truly inform instruction. However, this method goes against much of what is the institution of school in the United States.

Grades still matter more than learning to far too many people in our society, including teachers, parents, and students. Insurance companies provide discounts for honor roll status and restaurants give away pizza for A's. Parents typically gauge whether their child is doing well in school by the grade he or she receives. But do grades translate into what a student has learned and how he or she has achieved? Sometimes, but not always.

In *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement*, Douglas Reeves writes that grading practices in America's schools are arbitrary and ambiguous. They depend solely on the system of the individual teacher, often leaving students to guess how their grade was truly determined. Practices such as grading on a scale, recording zeros for incomplete or missing assignments, and basing the majority of a grade on a final exam treat students unfairly. Grading might also include factors such as writing legibility, notebook organization, and assignment neatness.

Our society values statistics so we can compare and form opinions. Grades and test scores are statistics, plain and simple. When viewing a baseball game, the statistics of each player who steps into the batter's box flashes across the screen, as does the score of

the game. And during election season, you cannot miss hearing or reading poll results about the political candidates. These statistics vary in strength of validity. When a ballplayer hits a home run, we are pretty certain it is a home run. However, a student reaching proficiency is not nearly as clear.

Assessing for Learning

In *Assessing Student Outcomes*, Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jay McTighe write that “What we now know about learning indicates that assessment and learning are closely and intimately tied.” As a teacher, I experienced success with students when I connected assessment with learning. When I made the learning targets clear and explicit to students, they were more apt to learn. My own teaching was more efficient when I could base my next steps on the assessment data I had from my measurement of learning standards and not necessarily what the state testing results reported.

What prevents assessing for learning to flourish in our schools? One factor is that many teachers continue to remain isolated in their classrooms. A paradigm shift toward a climate of teacher collaboration is needed so that teachers feel supported using formative assessments to improve teaching and learning. Collaboration creates common assessment language among teachers and the discovery of best assessment practices. However, principals face challenges to create time and support for collaboration because of current school structures and practices.

In order to take the emphasis away from testing and instead focus on learning, the educational community must begin with a change in the attitudes and beliefs of teachers about the primary purpose of assessment. Grades, ranking students, and standardized testing are institutionalized in American education. In *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Michael Fullan described that to change institutionalized practice the structure of the organization must change, which in turn leads to a change in attitudes and beliefs.

I recommend the following structural actions:

- Schools should develop cultures that support professional learning communities.
- Teachers should collaboratively build assessment systems that encourage the use of formative assessments with less emphasis on summative assessments.
- School communities should create grading systems that report student learning instead of grades.
- Principals should use the evaluation process to support teachers using assessment for learning, and encourage teachers to take risks with their teaching practice.
- School constituents should lobby for legislation that rewards and supports formative assessing and effective teaching.
- The central office should build leadership capacity at the school level to sustain an institutional shift to using formative assessment.

We need to be activists for “Assessing for Learning” instead of the honor roll. Our classroom doors have to be open to each other and to our public. Let’s educate our communities about the importance of the research-based practice of formative assessments and the link to student success. With a permanent change in attitudes and beliefs about the purpose of assessment, high stakes testing will take a back seat to high performing student learning. Then we will be doing what is truly best for students!

Here's Your Chance to Speak Out

The author presents an argument in favor of formative assessments, explaining that until educators support a culture where learning is emphasized more than grading, teaching will not change. Is this the solution to improving teaching and learning? Share your thoughts on the Principals' Office blog at www.naesp.org/blog. Click on Speaking Out.