

# Evaluation Brief

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Volume 2, Number 1  
January 2000

## **Working Smarter: Five Challenges for Every School System**

As schools face challenges of providing quality education for all students, educators must think about working smarter, not just working harder. Rather than rush into strategies for increasing student achievement that may be isolated and incompatible with larger goals, schools must create comprehensive plans to unify major initiatives, encourage students to build on prior knowledge and past successes, and work toward a “big picture ” that ensures high quality preK-12 education.

Many educators feel overwhelmed with pressures surrounding accountability. They believe there are conflicts between end-of-grade and end-of-course tests and their desires to provide students with rich instructional experiences, not trusting the latter to address the former. This brief suggests five unifying guidelines that can form the basis from which coordinated, successful strategies for student success can be implemented. While it is evident that individuals cannot solve these problems alone, within every school system there is collective professional expertise that, if utilized, can make this happen.

- 1. Create communities of educators responsible for groups of students.***  
The community of educators responsible for a group of students (i.e., the middle schools that feed to the high schools and the elementary schools that feed to these middle schools) must work together to provide a seamless education, preK-12.
- 2. Create models of proficient, high-quality, on-grade level student work.***  
Students, parents, teachers, and school administrators need clear models of high-quality work that set the standard for what students should know and be able to do.
- 3. Make collections of evidence for every student every year.***  
Collections of evidence can document both progress and achievement and provide windows into each student’s thinking.
- 4. Discuss currently implemented classroom assessment practices and reflect on positive ways to make these more powerful.***  
Faculties must engage in focused conversations about how they are, or are not, using classroom assessments to inform instruction and consistently evaluate student work.

## **5. *Develop strategies for increased student responsibility at every grade.***

Finding ways to encourage students at every grade to take greater responsibility for their own learning should be a goal in every school.

### ***Create preK-12 communities of educators***

Schooling for students is preK-12, and no school works in isolation. Students' formal education is the responsibility of every teacher and administrator in all schools that students attend. This means that elementary, middle, and high schools must work together as a community of educators for the students in their care. Attending the very best middle school in North Carolina, for example, will serve a student well only if the schools that precede and follow are of an equal quality.

Organized, coherent programs of study preK-12 occur when all educators

- **Understand the scope and sequence of the content they teach.** Knowing what is appropriate for multiple levels can help teachers better articulate expectations, coordinate a common vocabulary, and build a coherent instructional sequence.
- **Respect and share expertise among faculty members preK-12.** High school teachers, for example, often have content expertise that can help elementary and middle school teachers understand how the content is building. Elementary teachers often have expertise in addressing diverse learning styles and needs of students that can serve as models for middle and high school teachers. Middle school teachers have experiences working in teams to share.
- **Use data more efficiently and identify the needs of students across grades.** Shared information can be powerful when used for diagnosis and planned intervention.

Schools must leave their individual egos behind and become more cooperative than competitive, serving as critical friends and viewing themselves as part of the community of educators preK-12. The process of creating a preK-12 community of educators begins with superintendent and central office leadership that is ready to 'roll up its sleeves' and work beside building administrators. However, building administrators must take responsibility for beginning the dialogue with colleagues. Together, school system administrators must share the responsibility for creating opportunities for sharing ideas and making coordination a priority. Students deserve nothing less.

### ***Create models of high-quality work***

Models of proficient, high-quality, on-grade level work are needed to guide student learning. Teachers need these models for consistency in expectations and grading; parents need these models for understanding how well their child is doing in relation to grade-level expectations; students need these models to self-assess and to understand the targets they are aiming to achieve.

Defining proficiency as a certain test score is not sufficient as a guide for quality work. A sufficient collection will give students samples of how the criteria for quality work are implemented. It will also demonstrate student understanding and application in a variety of

contexts, allowing teachers and parents to view students' reasoning and skills. Teachers in the same school, teachers in the same school system—all teachers throughout North Carolina—need to establish the same set of expectations for all students and provide concrete, explicit models of how those expectations look in student work.

The ultimate goal is a system-wide collection of evidence of student learning that is consistent, explicit, and of high quality. The process begins when teachers in the same grade or the same course discuss samples of their students' work that they consider to be high-quality. These conversations must be open, clarifying the criteria for why a sample is of appropriate quality. Also, these samples or examples need to be shared and discussed across grade levels and courses. It is important that student work grow from grade to grade or course to course. Administrators must be a part of these discussions. Central office staff play a strong role in providing content-area expertise and benchmarks that are based on state and national standards of high-quality work.

While assembling collections of quality student work may seem like an easy task, experience indicates that it is a highly-interactive professional activity that requires extended discussion, justification of criteria, and reflection. This long-range endeavor involves continuous refinement, but will prove an extremely rewarding professional activity. It should also result in a collection of models that can be displayed in every school to inform educators, parents, and students.

### ***Make collections of evidence for every student***

Collections of evidence can enrich instructional decisions and document student achievement in all classrooms, at all grade levels. However, because of student accountability standards, it is extremely important that collections first be initiated for reading, writing, and mathematics right away. Whether these collections are portfolios or less formal work folders, they are needed to document both progress and achievement. They should be part of the evidence used for determining on-grade level proficiency. They also can substantiate continued growth and inform instructional decisions for students who enter at high achievement levels as well as for students for whom action plans are written.

While there is no one correct way to collect and organize evidence of student learning, teachers will benefit from the process of planning how to institute a portfolio system. The time teachers and students spend in class creating portfolios should increase student learning and responsibility, in addition to fostering a more productive teacher-student relationship. Determining what goes into these collections of evidence can be a complex task since there are numerous ways to organize these collections. Planning for portfolios should be a highly collaborative professional activity among teachers within a school. Questions to begin the conversation include “What type of evidence and how much are needed?” and “What will we know about a student if this particular evidence is included?”

### ***Examine classroom assessment practices to make these more powerful***

Substantive school improvement is dependent upon improving instructional programs in ways that utilize classroom assessment as a critical component of the teaching-learning cycle. While assessment has always been a part of school, many teachers have not had professional development that enables them to use formative assessment to meet the needs of individuals

within the context of teaching the class as a whole. Many educators believe that they are already assessing their students well, when in fact they use assessment primarily to assign grades. Within most schools grading practices vary greatly from teacher to teacher, thus diluting their usefulness as an indicator of student achievement.

In order to move beyond simplistic uses of assessment, such as rote drill for state tests, educators need long-term professional development on assessment. This begins with conversations among faculties but is facilitated by involvement of administrators.

### **Groups of teachers need to**

- Share examples of assessments with other teachers to determine what students understand and are able to do based on the assessments (What do you know about this student? What else would you like to know? How could you find that out?)
- Discuss how grades are determined in each class and develop a common system.
- Form study groups that focus on links between instruction and assessment.

### **Building administrators need to**

- Become more knowledgeable about and participate in discussions about formative and summative assessment.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to meet and discuss issues related to assessment.
- Support the instructional program that you would want your child to participate in.

### **Central office administrators need to**

- Coordinate with principals to provide coherent forms of professional development for teachers based on research on best practices and instructional goals.
- Collect specific examples from across the school system of clear, focused, informative feedback and share these examples with teachers.
- Coordinate with principals to identify and support teachers who can provide building-level leadership in how to use classroom assessment in powerful ways.

### ***Develop strategies for increased student responsibility***

Schools should be a place where everyone is working hard. Schools are students' employment. Increasing student responsibility is an important strategy for increasing student proficiency. There are a number of ways that educators can foster greater student responsibility:

- Give students clear and focused feedback on their performances. Feedback should inform students about strengths of their work, areas that need clarifying, and mistakes.
- Foster students' ability to self-assess and provide feedback to their peers. Teach students how to compare their work with models and criteria of excellence. Give them opportunities to observe diverse approaches to

- solving problems and hear different ways in which peers solve the same or similar situations.
- Provide students with rubrics that clarify criteria for quality performance for large, important assignments. Develop those rubrics through conversations with students.
  - Initiate student-led conferences. Like the development and use of portfolios, planning for student-led conferences creates a different interaction between students and teachers, one in which teachers and students are more likely to become partners in the learning process. Just as educators come to fully understand the content when they have to teach it, students more deeply understand what they have learned when they have to explain it to significant adults.

### ***Everyone has a role in meeting these five challenges***

If school systems are to build a foundation for the many instructional strategies and special programs that are currently being used to foster and support student achievement, a comprehensive approach to preK-12 education is needed. Strong leadership from the superintendent and central office staff should model a shared responsibility and facilitate principals and teachers in their work to set standards. Faculties must work together to examine their classroom assessment and grading practices. As models of high-quality work for each subject and each grade are collected, teachers should share these models with parents and students. Schools must also be proactive in identifying ways to support greater student responsibility. Working smarter involves everyone—parents and students, teachers and principals, central office staff and principals—working together to create a preK-12 learning environment that includes high expectations and support strategies for student accountability and achievement.