

## Authentic and Student-Centered Assessment for Middle School

### What do authentic and student-centered assessment practices look like for middle school learners?

These practices align with clear, high standards that your students understand. They emphasize your students showing what they know. They spotlight students' work, in students' terms. They make students an active partner in guiding their learning and ask them to set goals and assess their progress. They include an array of formal and informal methods to gauge and track students' learning. Some of these you design with your students, and all assess learning in ways that are real and meaningful to students. The data that assessments produce help you fine-tune your instruction to meet your students' needs.

### How does authentic and student-centered assessment impact teaching?

- It gives students timely feedback about their progress. When students identify their challenges in the midst of a unit or lesson, they can ask for and receive the support they need.
- It helps teachers tailor instruction to meet students' needs. When teachers find out that students are struggling during a lesson, they can vary their approach. They can also use a wide range of tasks and tools that let students show what they know.
- It trains students to assess their own work and that of their peers against established standards. Students learn what teachers expect, and they know what "high achievement" looks like. The quality of their work improves.

### What would these strategies look like in your middle school classroom?

Teachers can incorporate authentic and student-centered assessment into every lesson. Consider the examples below, where teachers use assessments to gauge students' learning and to alter their instruction.

#### Example: English Language Arts

Your students just wrote rough drafts for their compare/contrast essays on "The Lord of the Flies" by William Golding. When you assigned the essay, you passed out and discussed the grading rubric. Today, your students will assess their rough drafts using this rubric. You start the lesson by showing them an exemplary essay that a student wrote last year. Working with a partner, students examine the essay to find out how it meets the rubric's standards. Then, the whole class discusses the sample essay. Next, you ask students to evaluate their own papers using the rubric. In the process, they write down three specific edits that they will make to their drafts to raise them to the exemplary level.

#### Example: Math

Your students are busy identifying independent and dependent variables and creating graphs. As they work, you check in with each student. Many of their comments raise a red flag. Quite a few don't grasp the difference between dependent and independent variables. You bring the class back together as a group and ask, "Your doctor wants to create a graph that represents the relationship between your weight and your blood pressure over the course of a year. Weight or blood pressure: which is the dependent variable?" You ask students who strongly believe that weight is the dependent variable to raise their hands. Next, you invite students who strongly believe that blood pressure is the dependent variable to raise their hands. Finally, you ask students who really don't know to raise their hands. When you consider the responses, you realize that more than 50% of your class did not know the dependent variable or thought they knew and were wrong. You repeat this exercise with a second example. Again, more than half of your class does not know. You decide that during tomorrow's class you will once again cover the difference between the two kinds of variables. When you do so, you will use the concrete examples you discussed in today's graphing lesson.

**Example: Science**

One month ago, as part of a biology unit, you asked your class, “Are students’ one-mile time averages in Physical Education class affected by the time of day they have the class?” Working in teams, students researched the topic. Then, they came up with hypotheses and carried out investigations to test them. Groups analyzed their data and wrote up lab reports to document their findings. Today, the groups are presenting their results. Each group shares its work in a different way. One uses a PowerPoint slide show. Another displays and talks about its photo-essay. A third group performs a short skit. After each presentation, the whole class uses a rubric to evaluate the group. The rubric’s two key features are clarity of presentation and evidence in support of conclusions. To determine each group’s final grade on the presentation, you combine the scores from students’ use of the rubric with your score using the same rubric.

**Can authentic and student-centered assessment work in a standards-based environment?**

National Standards in English language arts, math, and science all advocate authentic and student-centered assessment. Here’s what these standards have to say:

**English Language Arts**

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’ *Early Adolescence English Language Arts Standards* (2001) state that accomplished English language arts teachers:

- Use a range of formal and informal assessment methods to monitor and evaluate student progress, encourage student self-assessment, plan instruction, and report to various audiences.
- Set attainable and worthwhile learning goals for students and provide meaningful learning opportunities, while extending to students an increasing measure of control over setting goals and choosing how those goals are pursued.

**Math**

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’ *Middle Childhood through Early Adolescence/Mathematics Standards* (1998) state that accomplished mathematics teachers:

- Integrate assessment into their instruction to promote the learning of all students.
- Design, select, and employ a range of formal and informal assessment tools to match their educational purposes.
- Help students develop self-assessment skills, encouraging them to reflect on their performance.

**Science**

The National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment and the National Research Council’s *National Science Education Standards* (1996) state that science teachers should:

- Use multiple methods and systematically gather data about student understanding and ability.
- Analyze assessment data to guide teaching.
- Guide students in self-assessment.
- Use student data, observations of teaching, and interactions with colleagues to: reflect on and improve teaching practice; and report student achievement and opportunities to learn to students, teachers, parents, policy makers, and the general public.

**Questions about authentic and student-centered assessment**

- How do I use formative assessment in my lessons every day, week, and month?
- How do I challenge students to demonstrate their understanding in real and meaningful ways?
- How do I use what I learn about students’ learning in my instruction and lesson planning?
- How do I involve students in creating assessment tasks and tools?

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Bransford, J., Brown, A., Cocking, R. (Eds.); Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, National Research Council. (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Available for free online at: [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=6160#toc](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=6160#toc)
- International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. (1996). *Standards for the English language arts*. United States of America: Authors. Available for free at: <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf>
- National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment, & National Research Council. (1996). *National science education standards*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Available for free at: [http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record\\_id=4962&page=R1](http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=4962&page=R1)
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (2000). *Principles and standards for school mathematics*. Available for free to members or for purchase at: <http://www.nctm.org/catalog/product.aspx?ID=719>
- The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (2007). *What are schools to watch?* Retrieved [2009], from <http://www.schoolstowatch.org/OurCriteria/tabid/118/Default.aspx>
- National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Wood, C. (2007). *Yardsticks: Children in the classroom ages 4–14* (3rd ed.). Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.