



Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Introduction

This document provides a set of standards to guide decisions about assessing the teaching and learning of literacy. In the past 30 years, research has produced revolutionary changes in our understanding of language, learning, and the complex literacy demands of our rapidly changing society. The standards proposed in this document are intended to reflect these advances in our understanding.

Readers of this document most likely share common experiences with respect to literacy and assessment. For example, in our own school days, we were directed to read to get the correct meaning of a text so that we could answer questions put to us by someone who already knew that correct meaning or by a test (often multiple choice) for which the correct answers were already determined. In order to develop assessment practices that serve students in an increasingly complex society, we must outgrow the limitations of our own schooling histories and understand language, literacy, and assessment in more complex ways. Literacy involves not just reading and writing, but a wide range of related language activities. It is both more social and more personal than a mere set of skills.

The need to understand language is particularly important. Language is not only the object of assessment but also part of the process of assessment. Consequently, any discussion of literacy assessment must include a discussion of language—what it is, how it is learned, and how it relates to assessment. Before we state our assessment standards, then, we will give an overview of what we mean by assessment and how we understand language and its relationship to assessment.

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The Nature of Assessment

For many years, a transmission view of knowledge, curriculum, and assessment dominated and appeared to satisfy our social, political, and economic needs. Knowledge was regarded as a static entity that was “out there” somewhere, so the key educational question was, How do you get it from out there into students’ heads? The corollary assessment question was, What counts as evidence that the knowledge really is in their heads? In a transmission view, it made sense to develop educational standards that specified the content of instruction before developing assessment procedures and engagements.

In the 1920s, notions of the basic purposes of schooling began to shift from an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge to the more complex nurturing of independent and collaborative learning and of problem solving. This shift has gained increasing prominence in today’s postindustrial society, with its ever-expanding need for workers with strong communication skills and dispositions toward problem solving and collaborating. A curriculum committed to independent learning is built on the premise that inquiry, rather than mere transmission of knowledge, is the basis of teaching and learning.

This shift from knowledge transmission to inquiry as a primary goal of schools has important implications for assessment. In a knowledge-transmission framework, tests of static knowledge can suffice as assessment instruments. Students are the participants who are primarily accountable (either they have the knowledge or they don’t), with teachers held accountable next. Policymakers, including school board members, trustees, or regents, are the primary recipients of assessment data. An inquiry framework changes the role of assessment and the roles of the participants. Within this framework, assessment is the exploration of how the educational environment and the participants in the educational community support the process of students as they learn to become independent and collaborative thinkers and problem solvers. This exploration includes an examination of the environment for teaching and learning, the processes and products of learning, and the degree to which all participants—students, teachers, administrators, parents, and board members—meet their obligation to support inquiry. Such assessments examine not only learning over time but also the contexts of learning.

Inquiry emphasizes different processes and types of knowledge than does knowledge transmission. For example, it values the ability to recognize problems and to generate multiple and diverse perspectives in trying to solve them. An inquiry stance asserts that while knowledge and language are likely to change over time, the need for learners at all levels (students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers) who can solve new problems, generate new knowledge, and invent new language practices will remain constant. An inquiry perspective promotes problem posing and problem solving as goals for all participants in the educational community. For example, inquiry values the question of how information from different sources can be used to solve a particular problem. It values explorations of how teachers can promote critical thinking for all students. And it raises the question of why our society privileges the knowledge and cultural heritage of some groups over others within current school settings.

Inquiry fits the needs of a multicultural society in which it is essential to value and find strength in cultural diversity. It also honors the commitment to raising questions and generating multiple solutions. Various stakeholders and cultural groups provide different answers and new perspectives on problems. Respecting difference among learners enriches the curriculum and reduces the likelihood of problematic curricular narrowing.

Just as the principle of inquiry values difference, so the principle of difference values conversation over recitation as the primary mode of discourse. In a recitation, it is assumed that one person, the teacher, possesses the answers and that the others, the students, interact with the teacher and one another in an attempt to uncover the teacher’s knowledge. In a conversation, all of the stakeholders in the educational environment (students, parents, teachers, specialists, administrators, and policymakers) have a voice at the table as curriculum, standards, and assessments are negotiated. Neither inquiry nor learning is viewed as the exclusive domain of students and teachers; both are primary concerns for all members of the school community. For example, administrators ask themselves hard questions about whether the structures they have established support staff development, teacher reflection, and student learning. School board members ask themselves whether they have lived up to the standards they have set for themselves and their schools to provide teachers and students with the resources they need to guarantee learning opportunities.

Quality assessment, then, hinges on the process of setting up conditions so that the classroom, the school, and the community become centers of inquiry where students, teachers, and other members of the school community investigate their own learning, both individually and collaboratively. The onus of assessment does not fall disproportionately upon students and teachers (which is often the case in schools today); instead, all those inquiring into the nature and effectiveness of educational practices are responsible for investigating the roles they have played. Different members of the school community have different but interacting interests, roles, and responsibilities, and assessment is the medium that allows all to explore what they have learned and whether they have met their responsibilities to the school community.

The Nature of Language

Language is very much like a living organism. It cannot be put together from parts like a machine, and it is constantly changing. Like a living organism, it exists only in interaction with others, in a social interdependence. Language is a system of signs through and within which we represent and make sense of the world and of ourselves. Language does not contain meaning; rather, meaning is constructed in the social relationships within which language is used. Individuals make sense of language within their social relationships, their personal histories, and their collective memory. In order to make sense of even a single word, people take into account the situation and their relationship with the speaker or writer.

Take, for example, *family*, a word often used as if all members of society agree on its meaning. The word may mean different things in different contexts, however, whether cultural, situational, or personal. To a middle-aged white person whose parents moved across country with their two children and who repeated that experience herself, *family* may mean the nuclear family structure in which she grew up and in which she is raising her own children. To someone from a different culture—perhaps an African American or Asian American—the word may conjure images of the constellation of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who live together or near one another. So, meaning may vary from one person to another, as in this case, where meanings attached to the word *family* are likely to differ depending on one’s own experience in the family or families one has lived with. Thus, individuals make different sense of apparently similar language to the extent that their cultural and personal histories do not coincide. Consequently, when we attempt to standardize a test (by making it the same for everyone), we make the tenuous assumption that students will all make the same meaning from the language of our instructions and the language of the individual items.

Different cultures also have different ways of representing the world, themselves, and their intentions with language. For example, in any given cultural group, people have different ways of greeting one another, depending on the situation (e.g., a business meeting, a funeral, a date) and on their relationship to each other. Our own language practices come from our cultural experience, but they are also part of the collective practice that forms the culture. Indeed, the different ways people use language to make sense of the world and of their lives are the major distinguishing features of different cultural groups.

At the same time, language is always changing as we use it. Words acquire different meanings, and new language structures and uses appear as people stretch and pull the language to make new meanings. Consequently, the meaning that individuals make from language varies across time, social situation, personal perspective, and cultural group.

The Nature of Literacy

The nature of literacy is also continually changing. Today, many children read more online than offline. They are growing into a digital world in which relatively little reading and writing involves paper, most reading and writing involves images as much as print, and writing (both formal and less formal, the latter including e-mail, texts, Facebook posts, etc.) is becoming equal to, or even supplanting, reading as a primary literacy engagement. The tools of literacy are changing rapidly as new forms of Internet communication technology (ICT) are created, including (at the time of writing) bulletin boards, Web editors, blogs, virtual worlds, and social networking sites such as Ning and MySpace. The social practices of literacy also change as a result of using digital technologies, as does the development of language. New literate practices are learned and refined just by existing from day to day in what has become known as the mediasphere. For example, living with cell phones leads to texting, which changes how people view writing and how they write, and frequenting Web 2.0 sites, such as the video-sharing service YouTube, privileges a visual mode and shapes both attention to and facility with other modes of meaning making. The literacies children encounter by the end of their schooling were unimagined when they began.

Reading and writing online changes what it means to read, write, and comprehend. Literacy practices now involve both the creation and use of multimodal texts (broadly defined). Creating multimodal texts requires knowing the properties and limitations of different digital tools so that decisions can be made about how best to serve one’s intentions. Participating in social networking sites, for example, requires new literacy practices; new literacy practices shape how users are perceived and how they construct identities. This leads to new areas needing to be assessed, including how youths create and enhance multiple

identities using digital tools and virtual spaces. We now need to be concerned with teaching and assessing how students take an idea in print and represent it with video clips for other audiences. Similarly, we must be concerned about the stances and practices involved in taking an idea presented in one modality (e.g., print) and transcribing or transmediating it into another (e.g., digital video), and we must consider what possibilities and limitations a particular mode offers and how that relates to its desirability over other modes for particular purposes and situations. Children use different comprehension strategies online and offline, and assessments of the two show different pictures of their literacy development. Online readers, by choosing hypertext and intertext links, actually construct the texts that they read as well as the meanings they make. New multimodal texts require new critical media literacies, linked to classical critical literacy notions of how media culture is created, appropriated, and subsequently colonizes the broader notions of culture—for example, how youth culture is defined by and used to define what youths do, what they buy, and with whom they associate.

The definitions of literacy that have dominated schooling and are insisted on by most current testing systems are inadequate for a new, highly networked information age. Failure to help all students acquire literacies for this age will not serve them or society well. Not to teach the necessary skills, strategies, dispositions, and social practices is to deny children full access to economic, social, and political participation in the new global society. Not to assess these capabilities will result in curricular neglect and a lack of information to inform instruction.

The Learning of Language

By the time children arrive at school, they have learned to speak at least one language and have mastered most of the language structures they will ever use. Through social interaction, using the language they hear around them from birth, they have developed, without their awareness, the underlying rules of grammar and the vocabulary that give meaning to the world as they see it. Nonetheless, we often teach language in schools as if children came to our classrooms with little or no language competence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Children can request, demand, explain, recount, persuade, and express opinions. They bring to school the ability to narrate their own life histories. They are authors creating meaning with language long before they arrive at school.

As children acquire language in social interaction, particularly with others whose language is different or more complex, they gain flexibility in using language for different purposes and in different social situations. Learning a second language or dialect roughly parallels learning the first, for learning any language also entails becoming competent in the social relationships that underlie it. Children also develop fluent use of language without explicit knowledge of or instruction in rules and grammars. This means that grammars and rules are taught most productively as tools for analyzing language after it has been acquired. Even adults who have considerable facility with the language frequently can articulate few, if any, grammar or language rules. In spite of this truism, we often go about assessment and instruction in schools as if this were not the case.

Furthermore, although we pretend otherwise, language is not acquired in any simple hierarchical sequence.

In some ways, school actually plays a modest role in language acquisition, the bulk of which occurs outside of school. In schools, we must learn to teach language in a way that preserves and respects individuality at the same time that we empower students to learn how to be responsible and responsive members of learning communities. In other words, we must respect their right to their own interpretations of language, including the texts they read and hear, but we must help them learn that meaning is negotiated with other members of the learning communities within which they live and work. To participate in that negotiation, they must understand and be able to master the language practices and means of negotiation of the cultures within which they live. They must understand the language conventions that are sanctioned in different social situations and the consequences of adhering to or violating those conventions.

Although much of our language is learned outside school, studying language is the foundation of all schooling, not just of the language arts. For example, in science class, we make knowledge of the world using language. To study science, then, we must study the language through which we make scientific knowledge, language that has an important impact on the curriculum. If in reading and writing about science the language is dispassionate and distancing, then that is part of the knowledge that students construct about science, part of the way they relate to the world through science.

The Assessment of Language

Our description of language and language learning has important implications for the assessment of language, first because it is the object of assessment (the thing being assessed) and second because it is the medium of assessment (the means through and within which we assess). Instructional outcomes in the language arts and assessment policies and practices should reflect what we know about language and its acquisition. For example, to base a test on the assumption that there is a single correct way to write a persuasive essay is a dubious practice. Persuading someone to buy a house is not the same as persuading someone to go on a date. Persuading someone in a less powerful position is not the same as persuading someone in a more powerful position—which is to say that persuasive practices differ across situations, purposes, and cultural groups. Similarly, that texts can (and should) be read from different perspectives must be taken as a certainty—a goal of schooling not to be disrupted by assessment practices that pretend otherwise. To assert through a multiple-choice test that a piece of text has only one meaning is unacceptable, given what we know of language.

Moreover, to the extent that assessment practices legitimize only the meanings and language practices of particular cultural groups, these practices are acts of cultural oppression. When our assessments give greater status to one kind of writing over another—for example, expository writing over narrative writing—we are making very powerful controlling statements about the legitimacy of particular ways of representing the world. These statements tend to be reflected in classroom practices.

When we attempt to document students' language development, we are partly involved in producing that development. For example, if we decide that certain skills are "basic" and some are "higher level," and that the former need to be acquired before the latter, that decision affects the way we organize classrooms, plan our teaching, group students, and discuss reading and writing with them. The way we teach literacy, the way we sequence lessons, the way we group students, even the way we physically arrange the classroom all have an impact on their learning.

The Language of Assessment

Because it involves language, assessment is an interpretive process. Just as we construct meanings for texts that we read and write, so do we construct "readings" or interpretations of our students based upon the many "texts" they provide for us. These assessment texts come in the form of the pieces that students write, their responses to literature, the various assignments and projects they complete, the contributions they make to discussions, their behavior in different settings, the questions they ask in the classroom or in conferences, their performances or demonstrations involving language use, and tests of their language competence. Two different people assessing a student's reading or writing, his or her literate development, may use different words to describe it.

In classrooms, teachers assess students' writing and reading and make evaluative comments about writers whose work is read. The language of this classroom assessment becomes the language of the literate classroom community and thus becomes the language through which students evaluate their own reading and writing. If the language of classroom assessment implies that there are several interpretations of any particular text, students will come to gain confidence as they assess their own interpretations and will value diversity in the classroom. If, on the other hand, the language of classroom assessment implies that reading and writing can be reduced to a simple continuum of quality, students will assess their own literacy only in terms of their place on that continuum relative to other students, without reflecting productively on their own reading and writing practices.

When teachers write report cards, they are faced with difficult language decisions. They must find words to represent a student's literate development in all its complexity, often within severe time, space, and format constraints. They must also accomplish this within the diverse relationships and cultural backgrounds among the parents, students, and administrators who might read the reports. Some teachers are faced with reducing extensive and complex knowledge about each student's development to a single word or letter. This situation confronts them with very difficult ethical dilemmas. Indeed, the greater the knowledge the teacher has of the student's literacy, the more difficult this task becomes.

But it is not just classroom assessment that is interpretive. The public "reads" students, teachers, and schools from the data that are provided. Parents make sense of a test score or a report card grade or comment based on their own schooling history, beliefs, and values. A test score may look "scientific" and "objective," but it too must be interpreted, which is always a subjective and value-laden process.

The terms with which people discuss students' literacy development have also changed over time. For example, in recent history, students considered to be having difficulty becoming literate have acquired different labels, such as *basic writer*, *remedial reader*, *disadvantaged*, *learning disabled*, *underachiever*, *struggling student*, or *retarded reader*. These different terms can have quite different consequences. Students described as "learning disabled" are often treated and taught quite differently from students who are similarly literate but described as "remedial readers."

Further, assessment itself is the object of much discussion, and the language of that discussion is also important. For example, teachers' observations are often described as informal and subjective and contrasted with test results that are considered "formal" and "objective." The knowledge constructed in a discussion that uses these terms would be quite different from that constructed in a discussion in which teachers' observations were described as "direct documentation" and test results as "indirect estimation."

Assessment terms change as different groups appropriate them for different purposes and as situations change. Recent discussions about assessment have changed some of the ways in which previously reasonably predictable words are used, belying the simplicity of the glossary we include at the end of this document. For example, the term *norm-referenced* once meant that assessment data on one student, typically test data, were interpreted in comparison with the data on other students who were considered similar. A norm-referenced interpretation of a student's writing might assert that it is "as good as that of 20 percent of the students that age in the country." Similarly, the term *criterion-referenced assessment* once meant simply that a student's performance was interpreted with respect to a particular level of performance—either it met the criterion or it did not. Recently, however, it has become much less clear how these terms are being used. The line between criterion and norm has broken down. For example, *criterion* has recently come to mean "dimension" or "valued characteristic." *Norm* has come to be used in much the same sense. But even in the earlier (and still more common) meaning, most criteria for criterion-referenced tests are arrived at by finding out how a group of students performs on the test and then setting criteria in accord with what seems a reasonable point for a student's passing or failing the test.

In other words, assessment is never merely a technical process. Assessment is always representational and interpretive because it involves representing children's development. Assessment practices shape the ways we see children, how they see themselves, and how they engage in future learning. Assessment is social and, because of its consequences, political. As with other such socially consequential practices, it is necessary to have standards against which practitioners can judge the responsibility of their practices.

Using This Document

In what follows, each standard is presented as a statement with a brief explanatory paragraph. The standard is then expanded with additional detail. The text concludes with case studies that illustrate the standards' implications in both large-scale and classroom assessments.

The central premise of the standards is that quality assessment is a process of inquiry. It requires gathering information and setting conditions so that the classroom, the school, and the community become centers of inquiry where students, teachers, and other members of the school community examine, individually and collaboratively, their learning and ways to improve their practice.

[Standard 1 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard1\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard1)
[Standard 2 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard2\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard2)

[Standard 3 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard3\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard3)
[Standard 4 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard4\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard4)
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[Standard 11 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard11\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard11)
[Case Studies 1 & 2 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/casestudiesa\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/casestudiesa)
[Case Studies 3 & 4 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/casestudiesb\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/casestudiesb)
[Glossary \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/glossary\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/glossary)
[NCTE-IRA Joint Task Force on Assessment \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/taskforce\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/taskforce)

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 1

1. The interests of the student are paramount in assessment.

Assessment experiences at all levels, whether formative or summative, have consequences for students ([see standard 7](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7) (<http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7>)). Assessments may alter their educational opportunities, increase or decrease their motivation to learn, elicit positive or negative feelings about themselves and others, and influence their understanding of what it means to be literate, educated, or successful. It is not enough for assessment to serve the well-being of students “on average”; we must aim for assessment to serve, not harm, each and every student.

The following assessment practices are most likely to serve students' interests. First and foremost, assessment must encourage students to become engaged in literacy learning, to reflect on their own reading and writing in productive ways, and to set respective literacy goals. In this way, students become involved in, and responsible for, their own learning and are better able to assist the teacher in focusing instruction. Some assessment practices, however, such as those that include public comparisons of students, tend to produce conditions of threat and defensiveness, limiting students' engagement and their ability to reflect productively on their performance. English-language learners face a double hurdle, since their test results often reflect both their knowledge of a subject and their knowledge of the English language. Constructive reflection is particularly difficult under such conditions. Thus, assessment should emphasize what students can do rather than what they cannot do. Portfolio assessment, for example, if managed properly, can be reflective, involving students in their own learning and assisting teachers in refocusing their instruction.

Assessments that serve the students' interests might include many of the multimodal texts that students create outside of school because they are constructed for purposes that the students establish—for example, how they update their MySpace pages based on their interests, recent events, or new friends. Most of the texts they create as artifacts of typical reading of print in school are for purposes established by teachers. It is possible that we could get much more valid assessments of their literacy practices if we provided more opportunities for them to select both texts (whether print or multimodal) and tools (e.g., Web 2.0 tools).

Second, assessment must provide useful information to inform and enable reflection. The information must be both specific and timely. Specific information on students' knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes helps teachers, parents, and students set goals and plan instruction more thoughtfully. Information about students' confusions, counterproductive strategies, and limitations, too, can help students and teachers reflect on and learn about students' reading and writing, as long as it is provided in the context of clear descriptions of what they can do. It is equally important that assessments provide timely information. If information is not provided immediately, it is not likely to be used, nor is it likely to be useful because needs, interests, and aspirations generally change with the passage of time. In either case, the opportunity to influence and promote learning may be missed.

Third, the assessment must yield high-quality information. The quality of information is suspect when tasks are too difficult or too easy, when students do not understand the tasks or cannot follow the directions, or when they are too anxious to be able to do their best or even their typical work. In these situations, students cannot produce their best efforts or demonstrate what they know. For example, researchers have found that modifying or simplifying the language of test items has consistently resulted in English-language learners' improved performance and does not sacrifice the rigor of the test. Requiring students to spend their time and efforts on assessment tasks that do not yield high-quality, useful information results in students losing valuable learning time. Such a loss does not serve their interests and thus constitutes an invalid practice ([see standard 7](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7) (<http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7>)).

It is important to note that many classroom-level assessments also fail to meet criteria for serving student interests. Regardless of the source or motivation for any particular assessment, states, school districts, schools, and teachers must demonstrate how the assessment practices benefit and do not harm individual students.

This standard requires that if any individual student's interests are not served by an assessment practice, regardless of whether it is intended for administration or decision making by an individual or by a group (as is the case with tests used to apply accountability pressure on teachers), then that practice is not valid for that student. Those responsible for requiring an assessment are responsible for demonstrating how these assessment practices benefit and do not harm individual students.

Traditionally, group-administered, machine-scorable tests have not encouraged students to reflect constructively on their reading and writing, have not provided specific and timely feedback, and generally have not provided high-quality information about students. Consequently, they have seemed unlikely to serve the best interests of students. However, this need not be the case if they are able to provide timely, high-quality information to students.

Assessment instruments or procedures themselves are not the only consideration in this standard. The context in which they are used can be equally important. Indeed, the most productive and powerful assessments for students are likely to be the formative assessments that occur in the daily activities of the classroom. Maximizing the value of these for students and minimizing the likelihood that they are damaging for any one student might involve an investment in staff development and the creation of conditions that enable teachers to reflect on their own practice. Similarly, assessment by portfolio might work well when teachers have expertise in a workshop approach to literacy but not when there is pressure for performance on a high-stakes multiple-choice test. This is not to say that portfolio assessment that satisfies this standard in the classroom may not also satisfy it in the context of a high-stakes assessment, such as an accountability assessment.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 2

2. The teacher is the most important agent of assessment.

Most educational assessment takes place in the classroom, as teachers and students interact with one another. Teachers design, assign, observe, collaborate in, and interpret the work of students in their classrooms. They assign meaning to interactions and evaluate the information that they receive and create in these settings. In short, teachers are the primary agents, not passive consumers, of assessment information. It is their ongoing, formative assessments that primarily influence students' learning. This standard acknowledges the critical role of the teacher and the consequences and responsibilities that accompany this role.

Whether they use tests, work samples, discussion, or ongoing observation, teachers make sense of students' reading and writing development. They read these many different texts, oral and written, that students produce in order to construct an understanding of students as literate individuals. The sense they make of a student's reading or writing is communicated to the student through spoken or written comments and translated into instructional decisions in the classroom (e.g., subsequent assignments, grouping for instruction). Because of such important consequences, teachers must be aware of and deliberate about their roles as assessors.

This responsibility demands considerable expertise. First, unless teachers can recognize the significance of aspects of a student's performance—a particular kind of error or behavior, for example—they will be unable to adjust instruction accordingly. They must know what signs to attend to in children's literate behavior. This requires a deep knowledge of the skills and processes of reading and writing and a sound understanding of their own literacy practices. Therefore, it is important that teachers themselves be readers and writers who understand these processes from the inside out. The more knowledgeable teachers are on the subjects of reading and writing and the more observant they are of students' literate behavior, the more productive their assessments will be. It is particularly important that teachers who work with English-language learners possess the specific knowledge and skills required to recognize students' developing proficiency and help them become fully literate.

Second, teachers must have routines for systematic assessment in order to ensure that each student is benefiting optimally from instruction.

Third, because of the need for this level of expertise and because the quality of formative assessment has a strong effect on the quality of instruction, improving teachers' assessment expertise requires ongoing professional development, coaching, and access to professional learning communities. Nurturing such communities must be a priority for improving assessment. Teachers need to feel safe to share, discuss, and critique their own work in public forums with their peers. These conditions encourage the engagement of the multiple perspectives necessary both for learning and for reducing the effects of individual biases.

Fourth, as agents of assessment, teachers must take responsibility for making and sharing judgments about students' achievements and progress. They cannot defer to others or to other instruments. At the same time, others must come to trust and support teachers in their judgments. Such trust and support are fostered when school communities are organized in ways that bring multiple perspectives to the assessment process and counter any inherent bias ([see standard 5](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5) [\[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5)).

Fifth, much of the assessment information in classrooms is made available in students' talk about their reading and writing. When students have conversations about a book, for instance, a teacher hears the process of their comprehending. Unless a teacher can generate such conversations among children, this information is simply not available.

Unlike makers of standardized tests, teachers are in a unique position to engage in valid assessment. Because they are closest to students' learning, they have the opportunity to make many detailed observations over time. For example, the use of classroom portfolios can reduce the likelihood that a student's "bad day" performance will unduly influence a teacher's conclusions about that student's overall literacy. Classroom portfolios also allow a wider range of observations to be made in more diverse and representative situations, thus increasing the validity of the assessments. Teachers can adapt assessments to the special characteristics of individual students, instructional programs, and community expectations, as well as using their assessments to reflect on the effectiveness of their own instructional practice.

Superficially, commercially published tests appear to offer an objectivity that teachers' classroom assessments may lack. In reality, our understanding of language asserts that it is not possible to construct an unbiased test of literacy. The basis for less-biased assessment repertoires is teachers' knowledge about learning and literacy. The foundation of this assessment ability is deep and diverse knowledge of individual students and of reading and writing. The more teachers know about literacy development in general and, more important, about the literacy development of individual students, the more insightful they will be about understanding students' literate practices and the better equipped they will be to provide appropriate instruction.

Teacher knowledge cannot be replaced by standardized tests. Any one-shot assessment procedure cannot capture the depth and breadth of information teachers have available to them. Even when a widely used, commercial test is administered, teachers must draw upon the full range of their knowledge about content and individual students to make sense of the limited information such a test provides. A teacher who knows a great deal about the range of techniques readers and writers use will be able to provide students and other audiences with specific, focused feedback about learning. Indeed, students learn things about themselves and about literacy from teachers' feedback that no standardized test can supply. Most standardized tests compare students to one another, while teachers' comments can be specific and individualized, providing a clear picture of each student's special strengths and weaknesses. Students can then use such feedback in their self-evaluations. When students are able to engage in self-evaluation, they are more likely to take control of their own literate learning.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 3

3. The primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.

Assessment is used in educational settings for a variety of purposes, such as keeping track of learning, diagnosing reading and writing difficulties, determining eligibility for programs, evaluating programs, evaluating teaching, and reporting to others. Underlying all these purposes is a basic concern for improving teaching and learning. In the United States it is common to use testing for accountability, but the ultimate goal remains the improvement of teaching and learning. Similarly, we use assessments to determine eligibility for special education services, but the goal is more appropriate teaching and better learning for particular students. In both cases, if improved teaching and learning do not result, the assessment practices are not valid ([see standard 7 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7)).

If an educational assessment practice is to be considered valid, it must inform instruction and lead to improved teaching and learning. The assessment problem then becomes one of setting conditions so that classrooms and schools become centers of inquiry where students and teachers investigate and improve their own learning and teaching practices, both individually and as learning communities. This in turn requires teachers, schools, and school districts not only to use assessment to reflect on learning and teaching but also to examine, constantly and critically, the assessment process itself and its relation to instruction. No matter how elaborate and precise the data provided by an assessment procedure are, its interpretation, its use, or the context of its use can render it useless or worse with respect to improving teaching and learning. For example, climates in which perfectly useful assessment data are employed to place blame can lead to defensiveness rather than to problem solving and improved learning.

Ensuring that assessment leads to the improvement of teaching and learning is not simply a technical matter of devising instruments for generating higher quality data. At least as important are the conditions under which assessment takes place and the climate produced by assessment practices. Sometimes the language we choose to frame assessment distracts us from this standard. We believe that the commonly expressed need for "higher standards" is better expressed as the need for higher quality instruction, for without it, higher standards simply means denying greater numbers of students access to programs and opportunities. The central function of assessment, therefore, is not to prove whether teaching or learning has taken place, but to improve the quality of teaching and learning and thereby to increase the likelihood that all members of the society will acquire a full and critical literacy ([see standard 1 \[http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard1\]](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard1)).

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 4

4. Assessment must reflect and allow for critical inquiry into curriculum and instruction.

Sound educational practices start with a curriculum that values complex literacy, instructional practices that nurture it, and assessments that fully reflect it. In order for assessment to allow productive inquiry into curriculum and instruction, it must reflect the complexity of that curriculum as well as the instructional practices in schools. This is particularly important because assessment shapes teaching, learning, and policy. Assessment that reflects an impoverished view of literacy will result in a diminished curriculum and distorted instruction and will not enable productive problem solving or instructional improvement. Because assessment shapes instruction, the higher the stakes of the assessment, the more important it is that it reflect this full complexity.

Critical inquiry into curriculum, instruction, and assessment is important at all levels. Policymakers, no less than teachers and students, must have clear understandings of the curriculum and instructional practices in order to make informed decisions. Decisions based on severely restricted or distorted information or on unexamined assumptions will be poor decisions.

Two major problems beset efforts to inquire into curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The first is that reading and writing standards guiding curricula in many districts often fragment literacy rather than represent its complexity. They also frequently omit important aspects of literacy such as self-initiated learning, questioning author's bias, perspective taking, multiple literacies, social interactions around literacy, metacognitive strategies, and literacy dispositions. Furthermore, even when the standards come closer to representing these features of complex literacy, high-stakes assessments rarely address the difficult-to-measure standards, opting instead to focus on content that is easier and more expedient to assess using inexpensive test formats. For example, teachers who emphasize the clarity of writing, attention to audience, vibrant language, revision, and sound support of assertions advocated in many content standards rarely find such qualities fully reflected in high-stakes tests, or they find these standards assessed through items that focus on mechanics or conventions. Similarly, students who are urged in classroom instruction to form opinions and back them up need to be assessed accordingly, rather than with tests that do not allow for creative or divergent thinking.

A second, related problem is the power of assessments to shape instruction (see [standard 7](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7) <http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard7>). Pressure associated with high-stakes tests as well as some forms of progress monitoring have focused attention on implementing specific curriculum programs, interventions, or approaches to instruction. Instructional practices such as providing additional support for students who perform just below cut scores ("bubble kids"), but not for those significantly below, or efforts to increase reading rate without regard for comprehension, should be questioned. Other measures of opportunity to learn, such as teachers' access to ongoing professional development and the availability of resources to connect schools to local communities, must also be considered.

Policymakers and administrators, no less than teachers and students, have a responsibility to understand the complexities and importance of a full and critical literacy and the nature of instruction that will foster it. They must recognize that tests, although sometimes necessary, are often not the best assessment procedures for capturing the subtleties of teaching and learning. They must recognize test results for what they obscure or fail to assess as well as for what they reveal. In the public interest, they must not endow test scores with the power to tell more than they are able. Hundreds of studies have shown that nonschool factors, such as parents' education level or socioeconomic status, have a greater effect on student achievement than do school factors. Tests that do not adequately reflect a complex model of literacy send a misleading message to teachers and students about the kinds of reading and writing that are valued by society.

In sum, without critical inquiry into the link between specific assessments and curricula, it is difficult to know whether an assessment provides a full representation of literacy or even represents a valid measure of the standards it is intended to represent.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 5

5. Assessment must recognize and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing and the important roles of school, home, and society in literacy development.

Literacy is complex, social, and constantly changing. The literacies of students graduating from high school today were barely imaginable when they began their schooling. Outside of school, students live and will go on to work in a media culture with practices unlike those currently occurring in school (even in the setting of the school media center). Students need to acquire competencies with word processors, blogs, wikis, Web browsers, instant messaging, listservs, bulletin boards, virtual worlds, video editors, presentation software, and many other literate tools and practices. Traditional, simple definitions of literacy will not help prepare students for the literate lives of the present—let alone the future. Consequently, reading and writing cannot usefully be assessed as a set of isolated, independent tasks or events. It is critical to gather specific information about materials, tasks, and media being used with students for both instructional and assessment purposes. In addition, we need to assess how practices are used to participate in the broader media culture as well as to examine how the broader culture assigns status to some practices over others (e.g., texting as contrasted to writing paragraph summaries in language arts class).

Whatever the medium, literacy is social and involves negotiations among authors and readers around meanings, purposes, and contexts. Literate practices are now rarely solitary cognitive acts. Furthermore, literate practices differ across social and cultural contexts and across different media. Students' behavior in one setting may not be at all representative of their behavior in another. This may be particularly true of English-language learners who may lack the fluency to express themselves fully inside the classroom but may be lively contributors in their families and communities.

In school settings, instruction and assessment should be seen as highly interactive processes. For example, aspects of the learning situation interact with cultural and home environments to influence student learning and motivation. These social situations shape purposes for both teachers and students, influence the conditions and constraints present in the learning context, and affect students' motivation to engage in reading and writing activities. In the social context of schooling, many factors influence learning and performance. These include types of activities, management efficiency, grouping patterns, teacher and student expectations and beliefs, classroom interactions, and the classroom environment. In addition, factors associated with teaching, such as content, tasks, and materials, all affect literacy learning.

The quality and appropriateness of assessment efforts depend to a considerable extent on the degree to which these complexities have been considered. The quality of an assessment will be low if it yields an incomplete or distorted picture of a student's literacy. Characteristics of the text, the task, the situation, and the purpose can all have an impact on the student's performance, and only some aspects of reading and writing will be captured in any given assessment situation. Formal tests need to be considerably more complex than is generally true today. Tests that accommodate multiple responses, different types of texts and tasks, and indicators of attitude and motivation are all essential to a comprehensive view of literacy achievement. Wherever possible, assessments must specify the types of texts, tasks, and situations used for assessment purposes and note whether and when students' performance was improved by variations in text quality, type of task, or situation.

In order to meet this standard, we must depend less on one-shot assessment practices and place more value on assessments of ongoing classroom performance, assuming that classroom curricula develop the full complexity of literate learning. Finally, when assessment information is interpreted and reported, descriptive information about the assessment tasks and texts and the instructional situation should be included. Given the complexity of the tasks involved, reducing reading and writing performance to a letter or number grade is unacceptable.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 6

6. Assessment must be fair and equitable.

We live in a multicultural society with laws that promise equal rights to all. Our school communities must work to ensure that all students, as different as they are in cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic background, receive a fair and equitable education. Assessment plays an important part in ensuring fairness and equity, first, because it is intimately related to curriculum, instruction, and learning, and second, because assessment provides a seemingly impartial way of determining who should and who should not be given access to educational institutions and resources. To be fair, then, assessment must be as free as possible of biases based on ethnic group, gender, nationality, religion, socioeconomic condition, sexual orientation, or disability. Furthermore, assessment must help us to confront biases that exist in schooling.

In the past, standardized tests have been viewed as a means to avoid the cultural and personal biases of teachers' judgments. However, just as it is impossible to eliminate bias from teachers, it is also impossible to produce an unbiased test of reading or writing. Language itself involves social conventions that differ from culture to culture. Furthermore, words have different shades of meaning for different cultures, and the variation in life experiences across culturally, economically, and geographically different situations can be quite extreme. Consequently, students differ enormously in the interpretations they give to the texts they read, the topics they feel comfortable writing about, and the ways they respond to different forms of assessment. The curriculum-distorting effects of high-stakes testing are also distributed unevenly across subgroups of the population. In the United States, urban schools with significant numbers of students living in poverty are more subject to the curriculum-narrowing pressures of high-stakes testing than are more affluent suburban schools.

The inevitability of bias notwithstanding, when tests must be used, as many biases as possible should be controlled. Whenever possible, assessment should be accomplished in a language that will not interfere with the individual's performance. Assessment practices should not devalue cultural differences in dialect. Students have the right to learn the language of the dominant culture because it is the language of power. However, students should not be penalized in assessments for using their home language where the privileged dialect is not specifically required. Assessment must also take into consideration the differences between basic and academic language and the length of time students need to become skilled at each.

Biases routinely occur in assessments and in the curricula they represent. For example, all students should study and be assessed on literature from and knowledge of cultures other than their own. Failure to do so introduces a cultural bias. However, there are other biases that regularly occur as a result of assessments. Students who are initially less successful than others in literacy acquisition often find that their curriculum shrinks to one that is less engaging and less mind-expanding. This form of bias is often also associated with economic differences across schools, and it perpetuates those differences by reducing the breadth and complexity of the literacy students acquire. Assessment that allows for critical inquiry into the curriculum is an important antidote to such common but avoidable inequalities and also serves to make institutional biases clear and public.

Most biases are part of the perspective we bring from our cultural backgrounds, so we tend not to notice them in ourselves. We must strive to have the testing industry, policymakers, administrators, and teachers—all those charged with creating and interpreting tests—reflect and respect the diversity of our society. At the same time, it is particularly important that multiple perspectives be brought to bear on assessment issues ([see standard 8](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard8) <http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard8>). One way to take test bias seriously would be to ensure strong and varied representation of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse groups in the construction of public tests. In this way, test biases should become apparent and, once recognized, be easier to reduce. A second important way to address bias is to make tests available for public examination after they have been given. A third way to offset bias is to ensure that no single assessment is used to make important educational decisions ([see standard 8](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard8) <http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard8>).

Inequities in schooling can also be compounded through inappropriate assessment. For example, assessment practices, both large scale and centered in the classroom, often lead to students being placed in different instructional settings or programs with the intention of producing a better match between student and curriculum. This leads to a significant equity issue. On the one hand, a better instructional match is possible, but on the other, different and perhaps lowered expectations on the parts of both teachers and students themselves may result. Once students are assigned to systematically different curricula, uneven access to subsequent experiences and jobs becomes not just possible, but probable.

Other uses of assessments can also produce inequities. For example, external pressures regarding the use of tests often differ across school settings within individual districts or specific regions. This is particularly common in large cities. Similarly, a common practice in newspapers in some areas is to report the average test scores of students by district, school, or even classroom. Because individuals and businesses are reluctant to move into areas where schools have low scores on tests, tax bases and economic resources erode in these neighborhoods with the result that economically stressed school systems become more so. Pressure on teachers also increases, which creates greater teacher attrition and leaves high-needs schools with a less experienced teaching force.

When assessing, we must be sure to attend to the relevant competencies. For example, provisions should be made to ensure that second-language learners are assessed in ways that permit them to show what they know and can do, with consideration for the time it takes to develop both basic and academic language. For students classified as reading disabled, the situation is less clear. In some U.S. states it is considered appropriate for these students to have their reading assessments read aloud to them. This practice may seem fair, but it makes productive inquiry impossible because the assessment no longer represents the construct "reading."

We must also remember that, although assessment plays an important role in ensuring fairness and equity, the goal of equity cannot be laid solely at the feet of assessment. No assessment practice can shore up the differences in educational experience that arise from the obviously unequal conditions of extreme poverty and wealth.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 7

7. The consequences of an assessment procedure are the first and most important consideration in establishing the validity of the assessment.

Tests, checklists, observation schedules, and other assessments cannot be evaluated out of the context of their use. If a perfectly reliable and comprehensive literacy test were designed but using it took three weeks away from children's learning and half the annual budget for instructional materials, we would have to weigh these consequences against any value gained from using the test. If its use resulted in teachers building a productive learning community around the data and making important changes in their instruction, we would also have to weigh these consequences. This standard essentially argues for "environmental impact" projections, along with careful, ongoing analyses of the consequences of assessment practices. Responsibility for this standard lies with the entire school community, to ensure that assessments are not used in ways that have negative consequences for schools and students. Any assessment procedure that does not contribute positively to teaching and learning should not be used.

By asserting that procedures cannot be evaluated out of the context of their use, this standard puts assessment, teaching, and learning back together. It asserts that simply devising a more detailed or more complex test will not by itself result in a more valid assessment. If an assessment procedure has adverse motivational consequences for school communities, segments of school communities, or individuals, then the procedure is invalid.

Adverse consequences from assessment can arise in a variety of ways, such as in these examples:

- Assessment techniques that very publicly value only a narrow range of literacy activity or very controlling forms of reading and writing (as opposed to a more critical literacy) enforce a narrowing of the curriculum for students. This routinely occurs in the United States through high-stakes accountability testing. Classroom assessment practices can have the same effects, sometimes as a consequence of high-stakes testing practices. This occurs when, for example, classroom assessment focuses on worksheets and multiple-choice tests or when evaluative feedback on student writing focuses on spelling and grammar and not on students' thinking, substantive content, or organization or when classroom assessment focuses centrally on reading speed.
- Institutionally enforced commercial assessments reduce available school resources for teachers to conduct more instructionally informative assessments.
- Reporting procedures that focus on ranking or rating rather than on performance draw learners' attention away from the process of learning, reduce their notions of literacy acquisition to a simple linear continuum, disrupt collaborative learning communities, make students and teachers defensive, and thus inhibit learning.

This standard rejects the unfortunately common argument that a given test is valid in spite of the fact that its use has problematic consequences (e.g., placing a student in a program that does not serve her well). Inquiring into the effects of assessment practices is never simple. It should be ongoing, capitalizing on multiple data sources and multiple perspectives, always recognizing that these efforts are likely to raise value-laden conflicts, such as the tension between the public's right to know and the preservation of conditions that will foster learning. This standard means that assessment information should not be used for judgmental or political purposes if that would be likely to cause harm to students or to the effectiveness of teachers or schools. Schools have a responsibility to report assessment results to parents in a way that will assist, not hinder, students' learning and parents' understanding.

It is commonplace to talk about different purposes for assessment and to invoke the principle that the assessment must match the purpose for which it is intended. In practice, this has been largely ignored. Test publishers make claims regarding the validity of their tests regardless of the use to which they are put. In light of what we have learned about the ways tests shape curricular decisions made about students by teachers, administrators, and policymakers, a "user beware" attitude is unacceptable within the framework of this standard. If assessments are to be used for high-stakes purposes such as holding people publicly accountable, then they should be fully consistent with, and not a shorthand for, the assessment procedures used to provide teachers and students with knowledge of progress in the classroom. They must recognize the complexity of literacy in today's society ([see standard 5](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5)) and reflect the curriculum.

This standard has implications for our priorities when we choose assessment practices. For example, when a teacher observes and documents a student's oral reading behaviors and uses that information to inform instruction, the data might not be as reliable, in a technical sense, as a norm-referenced test. However, in the context of the teacher's professional knowledge, they are more likely to have productive consequences. Often assessments are chosen for technical measurement properties rather than for the likelihood of productive consequences for students and teachers.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 8

8. The assessment process should involve multiple perspectives and sources of data.

Perfect assessments and perfect assessors do not exist. Every person involved in assessment is limited in his or her interpretation of the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Similarly, each text and each assessment procedure has its own limitations and biases. Although we cannot totally eliminate these biases and limitations from people or tests, we can try to ensure that they are held in balance and that all stakeholders are made aware of them. The more consequential the decision, the more important it is to seek diverse perspectives and independent sources of data. For example, decisions about placement in or eligibility for specialized programs have a profound influence on a student's life and learning. Such decisions are simply too important to make on the basis of a single measure, evaluation tool, or perspective.

The need for multiple indicators is particularly important in assessing reading and writing because of the complex nature of literacy and its acquisition ([see standard 5](http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5) <http://www.ncte.org/standards/assessmentstandards/standard5>). A single measure is likely to be misleading or erroneous for individuals or groups. For example, timed essay tests of writing can significantly underpredict the ability of English-language learners to write under natural conditions, and instructional decisions made on the basis of results on such tests will thus impede their educational progress. Multiple sources of data, on the other hand, can allow for triangulation in problem solving. Sources of data can include observations made in different situations or by different people at different times or data from different assessment instruments. However, data from more than one of the same kind of assessment instrument (for example, a series of standardized tests) will not satisfy this standard because such tests commonly reflect a similar and narrow view of literacy. By the same token, even new data can be looked at with old eyes. Unless different perspectives and values are brought to bear on data, our understanding might not expand. Even the richest set of data can be reduced to mere conventions by a limited perspective.

From a more statistical point of view, the reliability of interpretations of assessment data is likely to improve when there are multiple opportunities to observe reading and writing. Adherence to this standard will also substantially improve the validity of the literacy assessment process because sampling more than one aspect of literacy permits a closer approximation of the complexity of reading, writing, listening, and speaking processes as they occur and as they are used in real-life settings.

However, seeking multiple perspectives and sources of data is not intended only for the purposes of reducing biases or errors in individual data sources. Instead, it takes advantage of the depth of understanding that varied assessment perspectives afford and the dialogue and learning they produce. Two teachers with different cultural or linguistic backgrounds might interpret a student's literacy development in different ways, each of which provides an important perspective. Indeed, because literacy learning is also social in nature, these two teachers' different interpretations will lead to different kinds of development. The exploration of these contrasting perspectives will lead not only to a more productive understanding of the specific student's development but also to an enhanced awareness of possible interpretations of other students' development—and of what it means to develop.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 9

9. Assessment must be based in the local school learning community, including active and essential participation of families and community members.

The teacher is the primary agent of assessment and the classroom is the location of the most important assessment practices, but the most effective assessment unit is the local school learning community. First, the collective experience and values of the community can offer a sounding board for innovation and multiple perspectives to provide depth of understanding and to counter individual and cultural biases. Second, the involvement of all parties in assessment encourages a cooperative, committed relationship among them rather than an adversarial one. Third, because language learning is not restricted to what occurs in school, assessment must go beyond the school curriculum.

The local school learning community is also a more appropriate foundation for assessment than larger units such as the school district, county, state, province, or country. These larger units do not offer the relational possibilities and commitments necessary for a learning community. The distance from the problems to be solved and among the participants reduces the probability of feelings of involvement and commitment and increases the possibility that assessment will become merely a means of placing blame.

With the school community as a center of inquiry, diversity of perspective is possible not only as a source of growth for individual classrooms and teachers but also among teachers, administrators, and more broadly among stakeholders. Diversity of perspective brings depth of understanding and productive problem solving, and face-to-face involvement brings personal knowledge of the issues of assessment as well as personal investment in them. If teachers are able to make informed assessments and articulate them well, it is largely because they have been engaged in dialogue about their students' reading, writing, and learning and have been supported by the larger community in doing so. In order for a school community to do this effectively, it is necessary to engage in self-examination and make learning with the community a priority.

To function as a center of inquiry, a school must develop a trusting relationship with its community. This relationship commonly grows by involving all members of the community, balancing power, and recognizing different points of view. Because building such a relationship is nearly impossible in the context of large schools (whose hierarchical structures discourage the openness necessary for reflection, discussion, and inquiry), manageable schools-within-schools become an important possibility to be considered.

Schools have a responsibility to help families and community members understand the assessment process and the range of tools that can be useful in painting a detailed picture of learning, including both how individual students are learning and how the school is doing in its efforts to support learning. A part of this educational process must also be helping families and the local community to understand the most effective and appropriate uses of a variety of assessment tools, including large-scale standardized achievement tests.

There must be an ethos that educators are learners too, particularly about their own role in students' learning and the operation of their institutions. In order for educators to learn from others' perspectives, school communities bear particular responsibility for ensuring that all their members become fully involved in the assessment process. Many parents and caregivers, partly because of cultural disparities, linguistic barriers, or their own schooling histories, do not feel comfortable voicing their concerns. School communities have a responsibility to create conditions and assessment procedures that make people comfortable doing so.

As families become more fully involved in schools and assessments, they become more informed about and more observant of their children's development. This involvement allows them to be more supportive of their children's learning and of teachers' efforts and leads them to articulate more clearly their concerns about their children's progress. When families are intimately involved in the assessment process, they are less likely to allow cultural or racial bias to interfere in their efforts to determine how well their children are learning and how well their schools are doing. Furthermore, when administrators, families, and the public become involved together in assessment issues, trusting relationships are likely to evolve. With a trusting relationship, members of the school community can confront limitations and weaknesses as well as recognize strengths of their curriculum and assessments.

Parents and caregivers know a great deal about their children's learning and have an important perspective to add to local conversations about assessment. Schools must engage parents and the local community in conversations about the goals they have for the ways children will use reading and writing and the ways reading and writing are used in the community. When parents and the local community are intimately involved in the assessment of learning, they are in a better position to understand the assessment information reported and better able to support the literacy learning of children.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 10

10. All stakeholders in the educational community—students, families, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and the public—must have an equal voice in the development, interpretation, and reporting of assessment information.

Each of the constituents named in this standard has a stake in assessment. Students are concerned because their literacy learning, their concepts of themselves as literate people, and the quality of their subsequent lives and careers are at stake. Teachers have at stake their understandings of their students, their professional practice and knowledge, their perceptions of themselves as teachers, and the quality of their work life and standing in the community. Families clearly have an investment in their children's learning, well-being, and educational future. The public invests money in education, in part as an investment in the future, and has a stake in maintaining the quality of that investment. The stewardship of the investment involves administrators and policymakers. Assessment is always value laden, and the ongoing participation of all parties involved in it is necessary in a democratic society. When any one perspective is missing, silenced, or privileged above others, the assessment picture is distorted.

Stakeholders closest to the process—families, teachers, students, and the local community—are most familiar with the intimate details of children's learning and are in the best position to observe and document the small, yet important, steps that make up learning. These intimate participants in the process have access to information about a child's growth over time, how a child is developing skill in the processes of learning that will lead to more learning in the future, and how a child is applying prior learning in new situations. Following public laws in most countries, policymakers have the responsibility of ensuring equity and preventing local injustices.

However, when policymakers develop practices that drive local assessment and instructional processes, other stakeholders' voices are easily silenced and assessment becomes dominated by procedures developed by people who have little regular contact with students or teachers. Policy has always privileged some forms of literacy over others, but today the privileged forms generally exclude genres and modalities that children increasingly use—webpages, social networking sites, texting, and so on—and that are increasingly required beyond school. It may be possible to get more valid data on traditional assessments, even large-scale assessments, if the content and modalities of the assessments are adapted to students' interests in nonprint media.

When broad-brush assessment tools, such as nationally normed, state-mandated standardized achievement tests, are privileged over other forms of assessment, the important perspectives of families, teachers, and students are silenced. Under these circumstances, assessment becomes something done to students and schools rather than a shared conversation with schools and their local communities. When assessment is done to schools, an adversarial relationship develops in which teachers and school administrators focus on how to raise test scores at the expense of learning. When broad-brush assessment tools are paired with punitive consequences in an effort to hold schools accountable for high standards, assessment conversations evolve into an "us versus them" contest in which the learners are the losers.

A common reaction to this feeling is to reject the value and credibility of the assessment procedure. At the same time, there is a breakdown in the relationship between those controlling the assessment and those who feel controlled by it. By contrast, the more ownership the various participants feel in the assessment process, the more seriously they value their own and others' stake in the process and the greater the possibility of quality assessment.

New technologies require changes in the ways we define literacy, and they offer new opportunities for assessing and reporting information about student learning. Electronic portfolios, data warehousing, Web-based assessment tools, and other digital innovations should prompt thoughtful conversations among all stakeholders to ensure that assessment information continues to inform instruction and to reflect the values of the local community, the needs of students and teachers, and the needs of the larger society.

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Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing: Standard 11

11. Families must be involved as active, essential participants in the assessment process.

In many schools, families stand on the periphery of the school community, some feeling hopeless, helpless, and unwanted. However, the more families understand their children's progress in school, the more they can contribute to that progress. If teachers are to understand how best to assist children from cultures that are different from their own, families are a particularly important resource. Families must become, and be helped to become, active participants in the assessment process.

Public education today is characterized by unequal funding resources among school districts and by unequal participation of families in all aspects of school activities. The first characteristic is chiefly responsible for the unevenness among school districts in facilities, resources, quality teaching, sound learning, and healthy environments conducive to effective teaching and learning. The second condition contributes significantly to the difference between productive and unproductive schools. Arguably, the most effective schools have highly active participation by families in all aspects of governance and activities. Economic conditions and family participation are closely linked, however.

Family involvement in assessment, which is inseparable from curriculum, instruction, and learning, includes the following:

- Parents and other caregivers should be knowledgeable about assessment. Because of their own schooling backgrounds, many families believe that report-card grades and test results from multiple-choice examinations are the most productive and informative measures of their children's performance, knowledge base, and achievement. They need to become knowledgeable about the diverse possibilities for assessment, what those possibilities have to offer for understanding and assisting their child's development, and the uses and misuses of various forms of assessment.
- Families should be active participants in the assessment process and all other aspects of governance in their school community.
- Families have valuable knowledge of their children's development and situations that can contribute to the assessment process. Sharing this knowledge should be important and encouraged within all school communities.
- Families should seek ways to become more knowledgeable about their children's development.

Paying taxes alone does not constitute family participation in children's education. Teachers need the knowledge families have of their children, and school communities need the diversity of perspective that families bring to school problem solving, including assessment. Both families and schools are responsible for family involvement. Families must seek ways to become involved, and schools must organize to include families in their assessment and staff-development programs and actively seek their participation. This is particularly important in the case of families who are frequently marginalized by society in general and by the school system in particular. Newcomer families may need additional support to help them build an understanding of school culture and expectations and to enable them to access financial and social services.

Involving families in the assessment process includes involving them in staff development or community learning projects in which they learn more about reading and writing. It also includes the use of communication and reporting procedures between school and home that enable families to talk in productive ways with their children about their reading and writing. Involving families in the development of new reporting procedures is essential, since they are the primary audience for such reports.

The size and nature of the school community will have an impact on the ease with which families can be involved in schools and on the resources necessary to increase their participation. Consequently, this standard implies adequate and equitable funding of schools.

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