Essential Components for Ensuring Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems are Culturally Relevant and Equitable

Purpose

This document serves to support supervisory unions and/or school districts (SUs/SDs) as they refine their local comprehensive assessment systems (LCAS) to ensure assessments are equitable and culturally relevant. The essential components listed below should be used to guide conversations around equity and provide opportunities for system leaders and educators to intentionally use culturally responsive practices in assessment development.

Introduction

> "All instruction [and assessment] is culturally responsive. The question is: to which culture is it currently oriented?" —*Gloria Ladson-Billings*

In the last decade, the State of Vermont has passed legislation such as [Act 77](#), [Act 173](#), and [Act 1](#) to further explicate and ensure the promise, as outlined in [16 V.S.A. §165](#), that every learner in Vermont is "afforded educational opportunities that are substantially equal in quality…" Specifically, the above legislation, and ongoing work to address educational disparities among [historically marginalized groups](#), including the impact of systemic bias on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), speaks to the importance of valuing individual differences in a student-centered learning educational framework and realizing the potential of every Vermont learner.

To ensure that this legislation is executed with fidelity, many SUs/SDs have taken strides to address social equity in their curricular and instructional practices. Inclusive and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction strengthen historically marginalized voices and empower all students to be agents of social change.

It has become increasingly evident that a lens of cultural relevance that is responsive to the needs of students should be used in classroom instruction along with practices that provide equitable learning environments for all students. To prevent a disconnect between instruction and assessment, educators need to extend that lens of cultural relevancy to assessment practices as well. Assessment without a lens of equity, privileges and validates only certain types of learning and evidence of learning, invalidating multiple means of demonstration and reinforcing the false assumption that certain students cannot achieve. ([Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment](#))

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As educators refine their pedagogy to honor student identity and focus on culturally responsive instruction, assessment practices also need to reflect these changes. Possibly the most valuable assessment information used to guide teaching for equity is the information that may not have been gathered due to 'how and what' was being assessed. For assessments to provide the most accurate information for all students, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, epistemologies, educational experiences, communication styles, and socioeconomic situations need to be taken into consideration when developing assessments. (The Ongoing Quest for Culturally-Responsive Assessment for Indigenous Students in the U.S.)

Since a student's race, ethnicity, and cultural background significantly contribute to their academic achievement, educators must ensure they are accurately assessing the learning of all students, including those from historically marginalized groups (Harry and Klingner, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Skiba et. al., 2011). Culturally responsive assessment ensures that all students have the opportunity to strengthen student agency and demonstrate the cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills and abilities needed to achieve college and career readiness. These skills and abilities should be described in an SU/SD's Portrait of a Graduate. Additionally, attention to the essential components of an assessment system helps to address concerns about equity and cultural relevance.

Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems: Essential Components

The Act 173 Technical Guidance document, Local Comprehensive Assessment Systems in School District Systems, identifies six essential components for effective assessment systems. The essential components are described below and include resources for supporting the design of culturally relevant, responsive, and equitable assessment systems.

Clear Vision for Teaching and Learning

> "We must teach the way students learn, rather than expecting them to learn the way we teach." – Pedro Noguera

An assessment system should be driven by a clear vision of priority goals for teaching and learning. A locally developed Portrait of a Graduate can be an effective tool for clarifying the destination -- what students should know, understand, and be able to do to be career and college ready. Tools such as personalized learning plans communicate how students can gain the experiences, skills, and dispositions to be college and career ready. A coordinated curriculum is the roadmap by which districts support students on their personalized path to being career and college ready. The Agency of Education (AOE) released a Vermont Portrait of a Graduate – a sample portrait developed by students, educators, and various stakeholders over the course of more than a year – to assist educators in clarifying their vision for teaching and learning.

A clear vision for teaching and learning requires an assessment and reporting system that enables all stakeholders to know where students are in relation to identified expectations. In order to ensure that this system is equitable as well as socially and culturally relevant, educators should:

- Collaborate with peers, students, and administrators to create multiple ways of assessing learning that allow all learners to demonstrate their knowledge and growth over time. (Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework)
- Create clear grading criteria in order to reduce teacher bias. When grading criteria are vague, implicit stereotypes can "fill in the blanks," but when teachers have an explicit set of criteria to evaluate — asking whether the student "provides a well-elaborated recount of an event," in writing for example— the difference in grades is nearly eliminated. (Experimental Evidence on Teachers' Racial Bias in Student Evaluation: The Role of Grading Scales)
- Bring students' culture into the classroom through culturally relevant performance assessments. Performance assessments can serve to center students' identity and experiences by asking them to show what they know and can do through multidisciplinary projects, presentations of their learning, and reflections on their educational trajectory. (Keeping Students at the Center with Culturally Relevant Performance Assessments)
- Ensure that school learning has relevance beyond the classroom by focusing on authentic issues and problems related to students' lives. Focusing classroom activities on isolated drills on facts is ineffective and knowledge gained through applied contexts is more likely to be engaging and result in deeper learning. (Classroom Assessment Principles to Support Teaching and Learning)

Design for Rigor

Working backwards, identify proficiency-based graduation requirements, performance indicators, and learning targets. Within an SU/SD, PBGRs at the secondary level should have a direct and clear relationship with critical proficiencies taught at the primary level. Clarify the criteria for proficiency. Construct related comprehensive performance assessments that integrate content and transferable skills, address social and emotional learning, require students to apply learning to new contexts, and elicit evidence of learning. Finally, establish related formative performance assessments to determine students' strengths and identify areas that require additional instruction and support.

The Glossary of Education Reform explains,

> The term **rigor** is widely used by educators to describe instruction, schoolwork, learning experiences, and educational expectations that are academically, intellectually, and personally challenging. Rigorous learning experiences, for example, help students understand knowledge and concepts that are complex, ambiguous, or contentious, and they help students acquire skills that can be applied in a variety of educational, career, and civic contexts throughout their lives.

Rigor can therefore be equitably supported and assessed when educators:

- Reduce racial bias by using a rubric that orients grading decisions to a limited number of specific, demonstrable criteria. When teachers are asked to rate student work along a vaguer spectrum of performance, based on meeting "grade-level" standards, their grading tends to favor the white student. (How to Reduce Racial Bias in Grading)

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- Maintain high expectations for all students. Teacher expectations do not merely forecast student outcomes, but they can also influence outcomes by becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. ([The Power of Teacher Expectations](#))
- Create student-centered learning environments that affirm racial, linguistic, and cultural identities; prepare students for rigor and independent learning; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; and empower students as agents of social change. ([Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#))
- Provide high-quality project-based learning opportunities by examining the questioning, problem-solving activities and tasks to ensure that they require students to engage in higher level thinking such as analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, or creating. ([The Relationship Between Project-Based Learning and Rigor in STEM-Focused High Schools](#))
- Share a sense of collective efficacy that reflects high expectations for student success. As a result, a mutual language that represents a focus on student learning as opposed to instructional compliance often emerges. The perceptions that influence the actions of educators then include: "We are evaluators," "We are change agents," and "We collaborate." ([The Power of Collective Efficacy](#))

An Assessment Inventory

Identifying the assessments that are currently in place is a first step toward the development of a coherent, balanced assessment system. This review can serve as an opportunity for educators to build a common understanding of the purpose of an assessment system, the alignment to standards or critical proficiencies, the gaps and redundancies, and the appropriate use of assessment data.

An assessment inventory involves a student-centered process to evaluate the quality of assessments administered to ensure they are high-quality, elicit evidence of deep learning, and provide information to inform instruction. Culturally responsive and equitable practices are supported when educators:

- Identify, discuss, and dismantle implicit bias in curriculum and assessment; evaluate the system for use of data points and assessment measures that reflect learning spaces, modalities, and demonstration of proficiency that go beyond metrics traditionally associated with standardized testing. ([Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#))
- Foster reflection and discussion about the purposes, practices, and effectiveness of assessments in the school, district, or organization; identify assets upon which to build; use questions to guide continued inquiry about how assessment can help to realize the academic and social emotional priorities of students and create more equitable learning environments. ([Assessment for Learning Self Reflection Tool](#))
- Analyze the assessment system to ensure that higher-order cognitive skills (e.g., evaluating, revising, and synthesizing data and information) and critical abilities (e.g., collaboration, problem solving, reflection, and research) are assessed. ([Local Comprehensive Assessment System Quality Criteria;](#) [Local Comprehensive Assessment System Quality Criteria Single Point Rubric](#))

- Evaluate the assessment system to determine if it promotes high-quality work and success for all students, rather than fostering competition, putting students in boxes, or pitting individuals against each other to get the best grades. ([Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education](#))

Assessment Literacy

A systemic structure designed to provide the time, resources, and professional learning related to assessment literacy needs to be in place. Teachers must have opportunities to calibrate scoring of student work to create consistency among scoring practices, and systems should identify and commit to reliable assessments. Discussion of student work is also essential for enabling teachers to support one another in determining next steps and improving outcomes for students. Developing schedules that allow for consistent and predictable opportunities for content-specific and/or grade band teams to come together is essential. Consideration should be given to leveraging existing structures such as Education Support Teams, staff and department meetings, and district teams and professional learning days in addition to school/day schedules.

Assessment literacy from an equity and cultural relevance perspective is enhanced when education leaders and educators:

- Understand that the primary purpose of assessment is to improve students' learning, as both student and teacher respond to the information that it provides. By finding out what students currently know, understand, and can do, any gap between the two can be made apparent. ([New Zealand: Assessment and Data Analysis: A Process)](#)
- Disseminate existing research on best/promising practices regarding culturally responsive-sustaining curriculum, instruction, and assessment to stakeholders in the district. ([Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework](#))
- Use performance assessments to provide a critical space for students to reflect on and share their personal stories and their identities as learners. ([Keeping Students at the Center with Culturally Relevant Performance Assessments](#))
- Make use of assessments in languages other than English, as they provide educators with the equitable tools they need to understand, support, and engage more of their students. Students, in turn, get to bring their whole selves to the classroom and have a true opportunity to demonstrate just how much they know, all in a school or district where their language and culture are both respected and celebrated. ([The Role of Equity in the Assessment of English Learners](#))

Personalized Learning Plans

Personalized learning plans (PLPs) that are used for goal setting and to document learning provide opportunities for self-assessment and reflection over time and create pathways for meeting future learning goals. Most importantly, PLPs ensure that students play an active role in student-centered learning environments where they can reflect on their own learning, cultural heritage, and linguistic abilities and aspire to new learning throughout their PK-12 experience.

Vermont's guidance on PLP critical elements recommends that students include baseline assessment results to measure growth over time. It is important to note that PLP's are student-

centered, developed, and can even be public-facing – different from other [types of educational plans](#) developed by schools. Therefore, careful consideration should be given regarding what type of assessment data is included in PLPs. The personalized learning process also provides opportunities for students to design performance assessments related to their interests and goals. The development of PLPs that reflect an equity and culturally responsive perspective require educators to:

- Create a culture of student-centered learning that is cooperative, collaborative, and community oriented; encourage students to direct their own learning and to work with other students on research projects and assignments that are both culturally and socially relevant to them. ([Teaching Diverse Learners](#))
- Help parents to understand how they can be effective partners in the education process by engaging in dialogue on a regular basis as early as possible about their hopes and aspirations for their child, their sense of what the child needs, and suggestions about ways teachers can provide support. ([Positive Perspectives on Parents and Families](#))
- Know that negative stereotypes about intelligence or aptitude are particularly dangerous in our society because the stereotypes are widely known. Research has shown that mere awareness of such stereotypes is enough to manifest the threat to students; one does not have to believe they are true. ([How Stereotypes Undermine Test Scores](#))
- Collaborate with students to define criteria for success and establish areas of focus based on the student's current skill levels, needs, and goals. The student consults with the teacher in scoring the task, considers growth from previous performances, and engages in setting or revising goals. ([Orchestrating the Move to Student-Designed Learning](#))

A Culture of High Expectations

Create a culture in which students, parents, and educators truly believe that every learner can achieve high expectations. Commit to meeting students where they are, moving them along a continuum of learning, and providing timely feedback and supports when needed. Invest in needs-based professional learning that builds educator efficacy. Implement a strong multi-tiered system of academic and behavioral supports that includes an [Educational Support Team](#) that enhances the ability of educators to meet the needs of all learners.

Additionally, the goal of [Act 173](#) of 2018 is to enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to all students who require additional supports in Vermont's schools. The following recommendations within Act 173 identify best practices for enabling all students to meet high expectations:

1. ensure core instruction meets most needs of most students;
2. provide additional instructional time outside core subjects to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction;
3. ensure students who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers;
4. create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and
5. provide specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts to students with more intensive needs.

Educators need to be responsive to the culture and norms of various communities, understanding that each child brings with them a tapestry of previous experiences. Educators, therefore, create a culture of high expectations when they:

- Invest in research to determine assessments geared toward academic achievement for underrepresented and underserved students of diverse and multiple identities. (Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework)
- Develop student learning outcome statements (what students should know and be able to do) using a cultural lens and involving students in the development process. (Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment)
- Offer students the opportunity to try again and really work with them to achieve expectations so that their perceptions of how and why they achieve might change from a belief in innate ability to the importance of persistence and effort. (Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Guide to Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching All Students Equitably)
- View students' first language as a resource, as opposed to a problem, so that the use of a first language can be perceived as a learning resource in the classroom. (Topic Brief 5: Dispelling the Myth of "English Only": Understanding the Importance of the First Language in Second Language Learning)

Connecting the Components: Tools, Rules, and Legislation

The Vermont Agency of Education's LCAS theory of action states:

> If each SU/SD implements a local comprehensive assessment system with a balance of assessment types that provides information about student proficiency in a variety of ways, clearly communicates performance criteria and identifies methods for communicating student progress, then Vermont's SU/SDs will enhance the effectiveness, availability and equity of services provided to all students. (LCAS 173 – p. 6)

One tool that can be used to support the expectations within this theory of action is the Equity Lens Tool. It was developed to promote a common vocabulary and protocol for developing, evaluating, and/or ensuring equitable educational policies, programs, practices and decisions regardless of a learner's race, gender/identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, language, disability, family background, or family income.

Additionally, Vermont has adopted legislation and rules designed to value individual differences, support each learner, and enable educators to develop strong relationships with their students. Act 77 promotes ". . . opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, styles, and abilities." Act 173 was created to ensure the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services provided to all students who require additional support in Vermont's schools.

The Education Quality Standards (EQS) state, "Students must be allowed to demonstrate proficiency by presenting multiple types of evidence, including but not limited to teacher-or student-designed assessments, portfolios, performances, exhibitions and projects" (EQS 2120.2.

Flexible Pathways. P.4). The inclusion of performance assessments within local assessment systems creates opportunities for learners to demonstrate new learning, reveal areas of confusion, and connect discrete pieces of information. [Maya Kaul from the Learning Policy Institute](#) explains, "At their core, such assessments provide a critical space for students to reflect on and share their personal stories and their identities as learners." Performance assessments should provide opportunities that empower students to respond from a cultural perspective and connect past experiences to new learning.

The Education Quality Standards acknowledge the importance of personalization as a lever for driving student learning by focusing on unique student interests, backgrounds, strengths, and needs. The goal is for students, teachers, and the community to work together to make learning rigorous, relevant, and authentic. Who students are, and what defines them as individuals, should not take a backseat to the dominant culture of their school community; rather, the school community should shift to reflect and be informed by their students and families. Personalized learning plans then provide a platform for enabling learners to document their educational journey over time. These elements, in combination with a proficiency-based system that requires learners to demonstrate competence before moving onto the next level or challenge, support the development of assessment systems that are socially and culturally responsive, equitable, and respectful of individual differences.

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(Revised: February 12, 2021)

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