



IT WORKED!

Using Common Assessments to Improve Student Learning

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Two years ago, I discovered the need to target the support I was providing in my role as Math Instructional Support Teacher at a middle school in Howard County. My focus was to continue to inspire the math teachers to make growth. Through the professional development provided for math coaches, centered on Tim Kanold's *Ten High Leverage Team Actions*, I worked with my math team to select a focus for our work together during our collaborative planning sessions. We agreed to work on the development of high-quality common assessments and on scoring rubrics, with the hopes of providing consistency amongst teachers of the same content and, ultimately, of improving student learning.

During this time, I was planning weekly content PLC meetings in Grade 6, Grade 7, Grade 8, and Algebra I, but slowly I rolled out the more intentional assessment focus. Some teams were in different places than others, but we followed a similar process. We began by unpacking the standards in the unit and discussing the big ideas they were about to teach. We used a pre-planning tool to help us identify the overarching themes, the prerequisite skills needed, the manipulatives/tools required, the specific math tasks, and the math practices highlighted. Then, we collaboratively developed a common assessment using a variety of sources: county-developed assessment items, PARCC released items, state department of education items, Illustrative Mathematics (<http://illustrativemathematics.org>), various other websites, and previous tests/quizzes. After pulling all the items together and editing our work, we evaluated our assessment using an "Assessment Instrument Quality Evaluation Tool" (Kanold & Larson, 2012; as cited in Kanold-McIntyre, et al., 2015). This tool allowed us to examine our assessments for the following indicators: length, balance of procedural and conceptual understanding, clarity of directions, and variety of assessment item formats. After vetting our assessments and making some adjustments, we moved on to developing a common scoring rubric: this is where the most impactful part of our work emerged.

As a follow-up to our planning sessions, each member independently examined the assessments, making necessary edits, clarifying directions, and assigning point values. When we came back together, a spirited discussion always ensued. We would go through the common assessment item-by-item to justify point values, make necessary edits, and develop agreements about scoring student responses. What came out of this process was most exciting. Our conversations always focused back on the how we would teach the standards, making sure we were all clear about learning targets, assessment limits, and the types of tasks we would need to provide for students to learn the mathematics necessary for success on the assessment.

My greatest "ah-ha" moment came right before we were going to have an off-campus planning day with the Grade 7 math team. I was talking with one of the team members about the action items we wanted to accomplish during our meeting when she stopped me. She explained that she felt that she could not start long-range planning until we had gone through the process of unpacking the unit and developing the unit assessment. She further explained that she wouldn't be able to start planning for the unit until she knew what the end goal was! Right there and then, I was shocked that the process had made such an impact on her and that she saw the true value in our process. I realized why these "high-leverage" team actions are so powerful, and how they can directly affect student learning.

We are now on our second year of this process and working to continue to improve the quality of our assessments, while developing common scoring rubrics. Our next steps will be to engage in some common scoring practices and to adjust our scoring rubrics to ensure consistency among teachers assessing the same content. I feel energized moving forward with a strategic process that is clearly working for us!

Reference:

Kanold-McIntyre, J., Larson, M. R., & Briars, D. J. (2015). *Beyond the Common Core: A Handbook for Mathematics in a PLC at Work, Grades 6–8*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

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