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A Tricky Balance: The Challenges and Opportunities of Balanced Systems of Assessment

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For more information

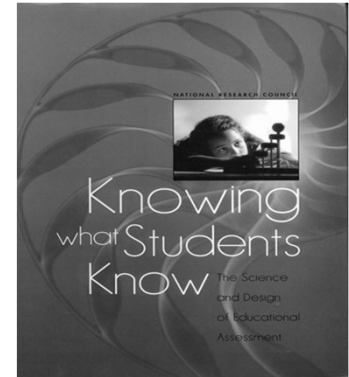- This presentation is based off of a comprehensive paper produced by me along with several of my terrific colleagues. You can download it at:
- https://www.nciea.org/node/493

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Assessment Design Involves Tradeoffs

A key trade-off in current assessment design: Accountability versus instructional support and improvement for individual students

"Ironically, the questions that are of most use to the state officer are of the least use to the teacher." Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser (2001)

Why? Timing, grain size, connection to the enacted curriculum…

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Balanced Assessment Systems to Serve Multiple Purposes

Assessment systems designed to serve multiple purposes require thoughtful planning about which data will be privileged at each level (Chattergoon & Marion, 2016). For example:

✓ standardized vs. dynamic/flexible

✓ uniform vs. variable dates

✓ independent vs. scaffolded performance

✓ delayed vs. immediate feedback
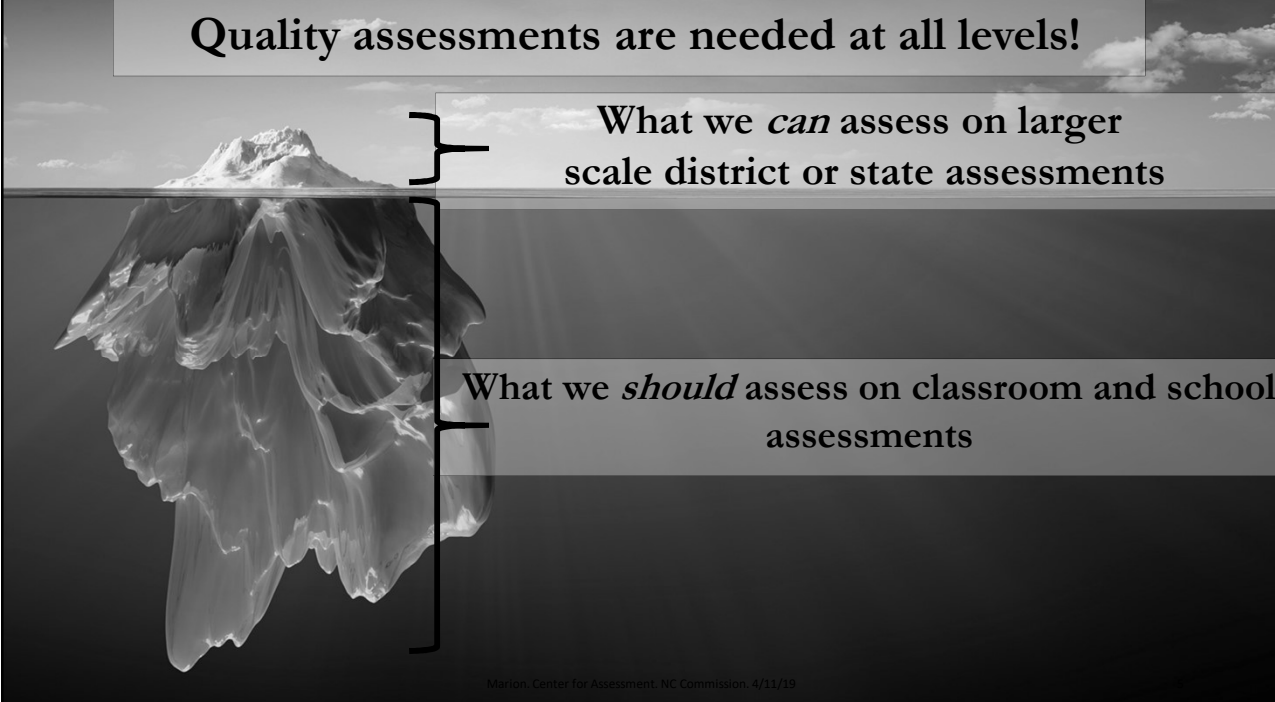
✓ stringent vs. less stringent technical requirements

Accountability/Monitoring ←→ Instructional

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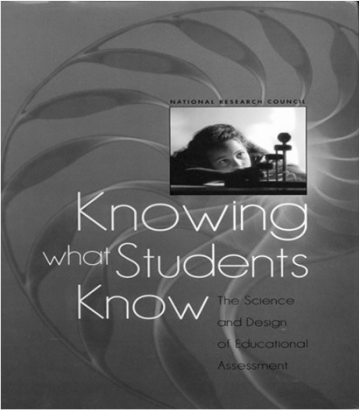
Quality assessments are needed at all levels!

What we *can* assess on larger scale district or state assessments

What we *should* assess on classroom and school assessments

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A Call for Balanced Assessment Systems

Assessments at all levels—from classroom to state—will work together in a system that is comprehensive, coherent, and continuous. In such a system, assessments would provide a variety of evidence to support educational decision making. Assessment at all levels would be linked back to the same underlying model of student learning and would provide indications of student growth over time (NRC, 2001, p. 9).

6

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Thoughtful and Sensible Criteria for Evaluating Balanced Assessment Systems

A **balanced** assessment environment should exhibit three properties (NRC, 2001):

1. **Comprehensiveness** – "a range of measurement approaches should be used to provide a variety of evidence to support educational decision-making"

2. **Coherence** – "the conceptual base or models of student learning underlying the various external classroom assessments within a system should be compatible"

3. **Continuity** – "assessments should measure student progress over time"

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Two additional criteria

4. **Efficiency** means getting the most out of assessment resources and eliminating redundant, unused, and untimely assessments.

5. **Utility** is a key criterion for assessment system quality should be the degree to which the system provides the information necessary to support the intended aims
   • Follows from a well-articulated theory of action that specifies the various intended outcomes for the system and the processes and mechanisms by which these outcomes will be realized.

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Giving Precedence to Classroom Assessment

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A powerful intervention for low-performing schools

9

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Comprehensiveness to address multiple users

Purposes/Uses	Context and users
• Accountability	• State policy leaders
• Monitoring Equity	• District leaders
• Instruction/learning	• District CIA leaders
• Grading	• Principals
• Program/curricular evaluation	• Teachers
	• Students
	• Parents

Assessments must be designed to support well-defined **purposes** and intended **uses**.

Coherence

- Vertical **Coherence** – conceptual base or models of student learning underlying the various **external** and **classroom** assessments within a system should be compatible

- Horizontal **Coherence** – alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment along a common set of learning goals

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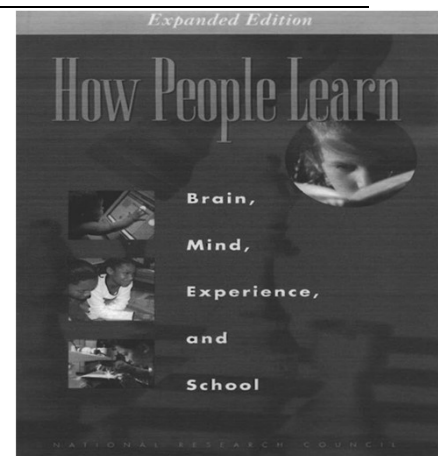
Coherence - Not Just Any Model of Learning

Assessments and assessment systems must be based on research-based models of learning.

Adherence to outdated, naïve, and/or implicit notions of learning are an impediment to assessment literacy and assessment reform.

A huge PD issue!

Bransford, Brown, Cocking (Eds.). (1999). How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School. National Research Council (just updated).

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Horizontal Coherence

- Vertical Coherence – conceptual base or models of student learning underlying the various external and classroom assessments within a system should be compatible

- Horizontal Coherence – alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment along a common set of learning goals

- When this is done well, it is a considerable benefit to low-performing schools
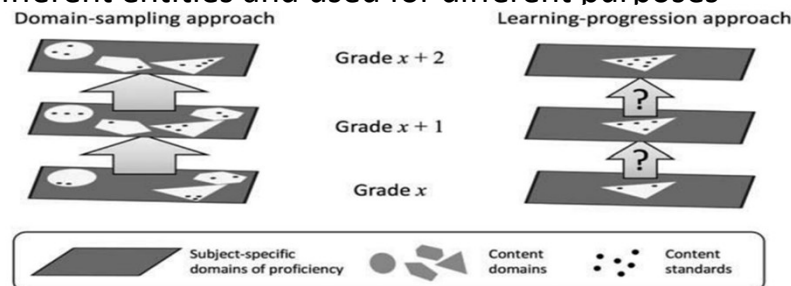
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Continuity

- Continuity criterion can be met when progress is evaluated using same set of assessments (e.g., state tests)
- More challenging when trying to evaluate progress across assessments controlled by different entities and used for different purposes
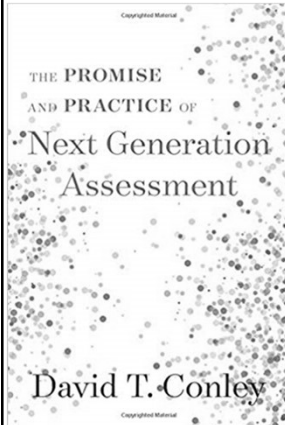

From Briggs & Peck, 2015

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Real or Mythical?

THE PROMISE AND PRACTICE OF Next Generation Assessment
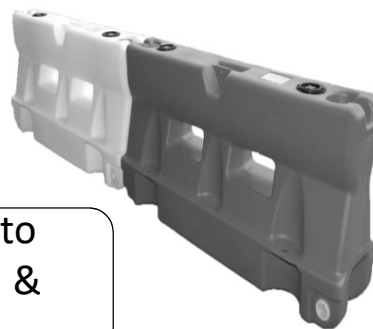
David T. Conley

- We've been talking and writing about balanced assessment systems for over 20 years
- Are balanced assessment systems the unicorns of educational assessment?
- David Conley went searching for examples of balanced assessment systems for his new book, but found only partial examples
- Why?

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Barriers to Balance

Politics and Policy

Assessment literacy

Weak ties to curriculum & learning

Proliferation and commercialization

Many more, but we think these are the "big 4"

16

Politics and Policy

- Who controls what?
  - States, districts, and schools "own" or control different assessments so how do we turn a pile of bricks into a house?
  - Essentially all states are curriculum agnostic, so can we have a coherent state assessment system?
- Two main policy considerations:
  - What is the influence of state accountability policies on designing and implementing state assessment systems?
  - How have the policies associated with the use, instability (often), and footprint of state assessments affected the implementation of balanced assessment systems at the state and/or district level?

Politics and Policy

- Which entity (or entities) has to address the challenges of coherence and comprehensiveness?
- What is the most appropriate role for states in supporting balanced assessment systems?
- What conditions need to be in place at the state level for districts to develop high-quality local assessment systems?
  - What is the influence of state policy and practice on local assessment system design and development?
  - Hint– A lot!!

Weak ties to curriculum & learning

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- *Knowing What Students Know* and many documents that followed stressed that a shared model of learning was critical for vertical and horizontal coherence.

- The state test aligns to common content standards; aren't these standards sufficient for designing a balanced assessment system?

- No! We need finer-grained learning targets that guide instruction through the year to serve as an anchor for designing assessments and to provide a framework for interpreting results.

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Proliferation & commercialization

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- We've seen a massive proliferation of assessments since NCLB was passed in 2001

- How has this proliferation influenced the development and implementation of balanced assessment systems?

- Let's ask the pink elephant question:
- What is the role, if any, of commercial interim assessments in balanced assessment systems?
  - How can they enhance the quality and balance of assessment systems?
  - How can they threaten the balance and utility of such systems?

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Assessment literacy

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- We've been talking about assessment literacy for more than 40 years.

- There are aspects of assessment literacy that are unique, or at least particularly important, to the design and implementation of balanced assessment systems. These knowledge and skills differ for various stakeholders:
  - Teachers
  - School leaders
  - District leaders
  - State leaders
  - Psychometricians

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What do we need to learn?

What do we need to learn and do to ensure we see coherent and cohesive systems that span from the classroom to the state?

- Conceptual challenges?
  - Criteria?
  - Purposes and uses?
  - Systems within systems
  - Components of the system (levels, layers, formats)?
- Practical?
  - Tools and resources
  - Partnerships
  - Assessment literacy?

- Empirical?
  - Documenting and evaluating program efficacy
- Policy
  - Accountability policy
  - Assessment policy

A Call to Action

We sense a desperate need to improve the quality and usefulness of assessments. Balanced assessment systems have been proposed for meeting many needs, but we do not see enough examples of such systems in practice to serve as models for others to emulate. We named several key challenges that explain why such assessment systems are rare, and we suggested approaches for ameliorating some of these challenges. We would like to look back after the next 20 years and see more progress than we have seen in the almost 20 years since the publication of Knowing What Students Know.

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