Supporting Professional Conversations about Assessment

A Guide for School Leaders

DRAFT for uLead 2019

This document has been prepared as a result of a development contract with the Alberta Teachers’ Association to support implementation of the Teaching Quality Standard and Leadership Quality Standard. The final document will be available on the AAC website https://aac.ab.ca/grants/tqs-lqs/ by the end of June 2019.
SECTION 1: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ASSESSMENT

Assessment Literacy is the Work of Leaders
The 2018 Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) provides a list of indicators within Competency 6 that relate to providing instructional leadership. A quick scan of the verbs within this section clearly reveals that this is an action list for leaders. Leaders are ensuring, demonstrating, facilitating and implementing as they provide instructional leadership.

Excerpt from 2018 Alberta Education Leadership Quality Standard (underlining added for emphasis)

Providing Instructional Leadership

6. A leader ensures that every student has access to quality teaching and optimum learning experiences.

Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

- (a) building the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students;
- (b) implementing professional growth, supervision and evaluation processes to ensure that all teachers meet the Teaching Quality Standard;
- (c) ensuring that student instruction addresses learning outcomes outlined in programs of study;
- (d) facilitating mentorship and induction supports for teachers and principals, as required;
- (e) demonstrating a strong understanding of effective pedagogy and curriculum;
- (f) facilitating the use of a variety of technologies to support learning for all students;
- (g) ensuring that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed;
- (h) interpreting a wide range of data to inform school practice and enable success for all students; and
- (i) facilitating access to resources, agencies and experts within and outside the school community to enhance student learning and development.

Indicator (g) within Competency 6 makes specific reference to a leader’s responsibility relative to student assessment practices.

(g) ensuring that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed;

School leaders also have specific responsibilities relative to supporting teachers in meeting the Teaching Quality Standard. Indicator (c) within Competency 6 states the following:

(c) implementing professional growth, supervision and evaluation processes to ensure that all teachers meet the Teaching Quality Standard;
Competency 3 within the *Teaching Quality Standard* (TQS) references five indicators of effective assessment practice. Leaders need to be well-versed in these same principles of sound assessment practice in order to provide effective support for teachers.

**Excerpt from the 2018 Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. A teacher applies a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction, and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:</td>
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<tr>
<td>(c) applying student assessment and evaluation practices that:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• accurately reflect the learner outcomes within the programs of study;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• generate evidence of student learning to inform teaching practice through a balance of formative and summative assessment experiences;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• provide a variety of methods through which students can demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• provide accurate, constructive and timely feedback on student learning; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• support the use of reasoned judgment about the evidence used to determine and report the level of student learning.</td>
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It’s clear that assessment is more than an event that takes place at the end of learning. Assessment is an integrated process, encompassing the entire teaching/learning endeavor. When viewed from this perspective, the LQS competencies reveal even more connections to classroom assessment practice.

Assessment literacy is an *essential* area of study for leaders. This resource is designed to support leaders in the work of enhancing their personal assessment capacity in order to assist them in providing effective instructional leadership in assessment.

The graphic on the following page uses icons to represent the five assessment indicators from the TQS. These icons will recur throughout Section 3 of this AAC resource. The text in the graphic is taken directly from the 2018 *Teaching Quality Standard*, and has been used with permission.
Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge

3. A teacher applies a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student.

Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

(c) applying student assessment and evaluation practices that:

- accurately reflect the learner outcomes within the programs of study;
- provide a variety of methods through which students can demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes;
- generate evidence of student learning to inform teaching practice through a balance of formative and summative assessment experiences;
- provide accurate, constructive and timely feedback on student learning; and
- support the use of reasoned judgment about the evidence used to determine and report the level of student learning.


Graphic design by AAC, added with permission.
SECTION 2: ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENT TEAM

Rationale for Establishing a School-based Assessment Team

The new Alberta Education Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) lists an array of responsibilities for leaders. Instructional leadership is one of the leadership competencies, and indicators relating to student assessment are nested within this competency.

As with any of the leadership competencies, the approach that a leader takes towards their responsibilities can have a direct impact on how their leadership vision is received by staff members and subsequently implemented within the school. The topic of assessment is often controversial, and a school leader needs to be able to understand diverse viewpoints, and then lead productive conversations in order to move assessment practices forward within a school.

There are many ways in which this can be accomplished. This resource outlines a process for creating a school-based assessment team. The rationale for this approach comes from a quote from Inside the Black Box, a meta-analysis of the research relating to formative assessment practices.

Teachers will not take up attractive sounding ideas, albeit based on extensive research, if these are presented as general principles which leave entirely to them the task of translating them into everyday practice – their lives are too busy and too fragile for this to be possible for all but an outstanding few. What they need is a variety of living examples of implementation, by teachers with whom they can identify and from whom they can both derive conviction and confidence that they can do better, and see concrete examples of what doing better means in practice.

(Black & Wiliam, 1998)

While school leaders have been given the responsibility to provide instructional leadership in assessment, it may be that classroom teachers can be the most effective ambassadors for implementing sound practices. When leaders work collaboratively with teachers to set a vision, they can also create structures to enable the entire staff to move forward with sound assessment practices.

School leaders continue to have a legislated responsibility to evaluate professional staff for whom they have responsibility. However, consider the value of a school leader approaching instructional leadership in assessment through a coaching mindset.

School leaders can support professional growth in assessment practices by

- learning more about sound assessment practices;
- providing a safe space to discuss ideas;
- listening to concerns and seeking to understand;
- discussing solutions and providing support; and
- celebrating success.

By so doing, a school leader is building a culture of formative assessment within the school.
Options for Providing Instructional Leadership in Assessment

The following graphic provides a schematic representation of possible options for providing instructional leadership in assessment.

**Short Cycle**
- Personal reflection and planning are central to the success of this leadership endeavor.
- The cycle on the left represents a school leader’s work in facilitating discussions about assessment with the entire staff. Teachers then have the responsibility to engage in classroom application of the principles discussed and to reflect on the impact of those practices on student learning. Ideally the cycle would continue, with assessment conversations occurring on a regular basis as part of staff meetings.

**Recommended Cycle (with Assessment Team Option)**
- The recommended cycle also begins with the leader’s personal reflection and planning.
- The cycle on the right represents a school leader’s work in convening a school-based assessment team, prior to engaging the entire staff in an ongoing discussion of assessment practice. The school leader would facilitate discussions with assessment team members who would engage in classroom application of the principles discussed. Subsequent team meetings would consider the impact of these practices on student learning, and develop a plan for engaging other staff members in assessment conversations.
- The benefit of working with an assessment team is that team members can provide a peer leadership role during whole staff conversations, which would also occur on a regular basis.

Time spent on enhancing school-based assessment practices will accomplish many indicators within both the Leadership Quality Standard and the Teaching Quality Standard. More important, an intentional focus on classroom assessment practice can have a positive and observable impact on student learning.
Environmental Scan
Before embarking on a plan for providing instructional leadership in assessment, consider the current context within your school in regard to assessment beliefs and practices within key stakeholder groups. The following questions could provide a starting place for reflection.

**Teachers**
- What conversations about assessment are taking place among the teachers at your school?
- What successes are they sharing?
- What concerns are they expressing?

**Students**
- What do students believe is the purpose for assessment?
- What student behaviours may be signalling an underlying assessment issue?

**Parents**
- What concerns are parents raising?

**Leaders**
- How confident are you in your understanding of classroom assessment practice as articulated by the indicators within the *Teaching Quality Standard*?
- To what extent are you confident in your ability to ensure “...that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed?”
- To what extent are the expectations of teachers, parents and students with regard to assessment practices consistent with your own beliefs about assessment?

Assessment is often a controversial subject. It is important for a school leader to understand the context of assessment within the school in order to provide effective leadership.

**Guidelines for Recruiting Assessment Team Members**
Once a leader decides to embark on the process of assembling a school-based assessment team, careful consideration must be given to the make-up of that team. Assessment team members should be teachers who are informal leaders among their peers. They do not need to be the most gregarious individuals on staff, but they should have an interest in ongoing professional learning, the confidence to engage in innovative practices, and the ability to engage in reflective practice. In a secondary setting, team members could be department leaders, but they would not need to be.

While there are many possibilities for who could be part of the assessment team, there are two groups of teachers for whom participation on a school-based assessment team would not be appropriate. School leaders always retain the responsibility for growth, supervision and evaluation of the professional teaching staff, and it is important that this project clearly remain at a distance from any part of the formal process of supervision and evaluation. As such, participating as a member of a school-based assessment team is not appropriate for:
- teachers for whom you have ongoing concerns and for whom you are considering beginning the process of supervision or evaluation; and
- beginning teachers, or those who do not hold a continuous contract.

The school leader may decide to issue an invitation to all staff to express interest in participating, or they may approach individual teachers to consider participating. In all cases, assessment team members should be volunteers.
Protocols
The purpose for the school-based assessment team is to engage in professional conversation, and for team members to implement various assessment methods/strategies/techniques within their own classroom. Team members should observe the impact of these practices on student learning and be prepared to share successes and challenges at subsequent team meetings and in whole school meetings.

The school leader has the responsibility to create a safe environment where team members are free to take risks with new assessment practices. Everyone is a learner within the team, including the school leader.

Confidentiality is essential within all aspects of the team. Teachers are focused on their own classroom practice. When appropriate, student names, samples of work, insights, and vignettes that demonstrate the impact of a particular assessment practice are shared respectfully and held in confidence.

Team members are encouraged to commit to the success of the team by attending regular meetings and actively seeking to implement the assessment practices within their classroom. However, if the commitment becomes unmanageable for any reason, team members are free to step down from the team without any repercussion.

At all times, the Code of Professional Conduct governs the activities and conversations within the team.

Suggested Meeting Framework
The framework for assessment team meetings is intentionally simple and straight-forward. Three key processes should be included in each meeting.

Check-in/Sharing
- At the first meeting, team members will introduce themselves and share their interest in participating in this team.
- At subsequent meetings, team members will share their experiences in implementing the assessment principle that was discussed at the previous meeting.

Professional Learning
- School leaders and/or team members can suggest areas of focus based on their own interest for further learning and/or a need they have recognized within their classroom.
- The AAC Assessment in Action video collection, the accompanying resource for leaders, and the AAC publication Assessment Conversations: Engaging with Colleagues to Support Student Learning can be used to support the professional learning conversation.

Commitment for Implementation
- Following the professional learning input and discussion, team members will make a commitment to implement the assessment principle/practice within their classroom. They may also identify any assistance they will need in order to be successful with this task.
- Discussions will take place regarding any whole school discussions/meetings that may be planned prior to the next team meeting.
- The next meeting date will be set.

Meetings do not need to be long to be effective. What is most important is that they are held regularly, and that the tone is positive and focused on learning, reflection and growth.
SECTION 3: RESOURCES TO ANCHOR PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Dimensions of Sound Classroom Assessment Practice

As part of the Assessment in Action project, AAC developed ten statements that describe the characteristics of effective classroom assessment practice. The Dimensions are organized into three key sections, using the organizational framework and colour coding from the AAC Key Visual.

While the AAC Key Visual poses a series of questions, the Dimension statements articulate a response to those questions. The Assessment in Action videos and the new AAC resource, Assessment Conversations: Engaging with Colleagues to Support Student Learning, are organized by the Dimensions framework. While the Dimension statements serve as a functional organizing structure, there is considerable overlap among the various statements.

The ten Dimensions of Sound Classroom Assessment Practice are reproduced below.

PLANNING WITH THE END IN MIND

Dimension #1: Clarifying the Learning Destination

Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers... derive the learning destination through careful study of the student learner outcomes.

Dimension #2: Planning for Assessment and Instruction

Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers... select methods for gathering evidence of student learning that are consistent with the learning outcome. The outcomes also guide the selection of appropriate instructional strategies and teaching/learning resources.

Dimension #3: Considering the Needs of the Learners

Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers... consider the strengths and learning needs of diverse learners when designing assessment experiences.
SECTION 3: RESOURCES TO ANCHOR PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT
Dimension #4: Engaging Students in the Assessment Process
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
engage students in the assessment process.

Dimension #5: The Critical Role of Practice and Feedback
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
intentionally plan multiple opportunities for students to practice, and to give and receive formative feedback prior to summative assessment experiences.

Dimension #6: Time to Reflect
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
encourage students to reflect deeply on their learning and provide time for students to integrate feedback into work in progress.

Dimension #7: Formative Assessment to Inform Instructional Practice
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
are able to interpret evidence of learning to determine next steps for students.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT
Dimension #8: An Accurate Picture of Student Performance
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
determine summative grades of student performance relative to curricular outcomes, without distorting the grades with extraneous factors.

Dimension #9: Combining Evidence in a Meaningful Way
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
arrive at a sound judgment of student performance by combining evidence from a variety of sources in a meaningful way.

Dimension #10: Communicating Student Learning
Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
arrive at a sound judgment of student performance by combining evidence from a variety of sources in a meaningful way.
SECTION 3: RESOURCES TO ANCHOR PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Assessment in Action

Formative Assessment
Dimension #5: The Critical Role of Practice and Feedback

Effective assessment practice is evident when teachers...
intentionally plan multiple opportunities for students to practice, and to give and receive formative feedback prior to summative assessment experiences.

Establishing the Conditions for Peer Feedback
https://aac.ab.ca/video/establishing-the-conditions-for-peer-feedback/

Video Summary
Teachers and students discuss the need to have a safe classroom environment in order for effective peer-feedback to occur. Although this video is set a junior high English Language Arts classroom, the assessment principles from this video are applicable to all grades and subjects.

Key Points
- A supportive classroom environment is required in order for peer feedback to be effective.
- Peer feedback must be modeled and practiced.
- Both teachers and students agree that peer feedback must be accurate.

Discussion Questions
- Why might students be reluctant to engage in peer feedback?
- What does a supportive classroom environment 'look like'?
- To what extent do our assessment practices create a supportive environment in our classrooms and school that would allow for effective peer feedback?

Connections to TQS Assessment Indicators
- generate evidence of student learning to inform teaching practice through a balance of formative and summative assessment experiences
- provide accurate, constructive and timely feedback on student learning

Connections to LQS Instructional Leadership Indicators
6 (a) building the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students
6 (c) ensuring that student instruction addresses learning outcomes outlined in programs of study
6 (e) demonstrating a strong understanding of effective pedagogy and curriculum
6 (g) ensuring that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence informed
SECTION 3: RESOURCES TO ANCHOR PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Using the Video to Support Your Own Professional Learning

1. Review the video: Establishing the Conditions for Peer Feedback.
   - Use the Key Points and Discussion Questions to guide your reflection.
   - What connections can you make to your past/current classroom practice?

2. Engage in background reading and study.
   - Assessment Conversations: Engaging with Colleagues to Support Student Learning (pp. 47 – 51).

3. Anticipate challenges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Challenge</th>
<th>Potential Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“My students are reluctant to share their work and give feedback because they are worried their work might not measure up, or that other student may ‘do better’ than them on the assignment.”</td>
<td>• This potential challenge signals an opportunity for a school-wide conversation about competition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “Peer feedback has the potential to cause hard feelings. How can we help students be honest with their feedback without creating an environment that is hurtful to students?” | • Brainstorm a process for beginning to create more effective feedback opportunities. For example:  
  o If peer feedback is a new experience for students, model the process using anonymous student work or create a sample of your own work.  
  o Provide templates for feedback prompts.  
  o Observe students at work as they give and receive feedback and provide ‘on-the-spot’ coaching. |

As a school leader, ensure that school policies/procedures are not inadvertently creating a culture of competition for scarce marks and causing anxiety by putting students who are at-risk in a vulnerable position. Provide time at a staff meeting for teachers to plan a feedback opportunity that causes thinking, rather than creating ‘cookie cutter’ responses from students.

Using the Video to Support Professional Conversations
(Assessment Team and/or Staff/Department Meeting)

1. Encourage assessment team/staff members to focus on the Key Points and the Discussion Questions as they design assessment experiences for students.

2. Encourage team members to be prepared to share their experiences (successes and challenges) at the next assessment team meeting and/or the next staff/department meeting.

Remember the value of working towards building a culture of formative assessment within your school, beginning with your leadership role. See Section 2 (p. 5) for more information.