



Solution Tree

**Ahead of the Curve:
The Power of Assessment to Transform
Teaching and Learning**

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Ahead of the Curve: The Power of Assessment to Transform Teaching and Learning*, edited by Douglas Reeves. *Ahead of the Curve* presents the insights and expertise of some of the world's leading educational thinkers and authors. Their collective work provides both a sound conceptual framework and specific, practical strategies for improving student achievement through assessment.

- This study guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. It is designed to help you benefit from and apply the ideas presented in *Ahead of the Curve*. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, assess conditions

in a particular school, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote positive assessment practices.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves to be a useful tool in your assessment efforts in your school or district.

Introduction

From the Bell Curve to the Mountain: A New Vision for Achievement, Assessment, and Equity

By Douglas Reeves

1. The author proposes we replace the bell curve with a new vision for achievement, assessment, and equity: the “mountain curve.” How do the bell curve and the mountain curve differ, and what does this mean for students and teachers?
2. What are the six questions the author proposes schools ask themselves with relentless persistence?
3. Does your school fall prey to the siren song, “Close the door and let me teach”? Or does your school believe that effective assessment practices are inherently collaborative?

Chapter 1

Using Assessments to Improve Teaching and Learning

By Thomas R. Guskey

1. According to the author, why are large-scale assessments generally not good instruments for helping teachers improve their instruction? How does your school or district use these assessments?
2. Does your school or district consider assessment an integral part of the instructional process and an essential element for student learning? Or do you treat assessments strictly as evaluation devices to gather information for students' grades? What is the difference between these two approaches?
3. The author argues that to be effective, assessment must be a source of information for both students and teachers. Critics sometimes call this "teaching to the test." The author argues this is actually "testing what we teach." Differentiate between these two concepts.
4. The author believes assessment must be followed with high-quality corrective instruction. How does this differ from reteaching? How could your school or grade-level department work together to develop ideas for corrective instruction?
5. The author advocates giving students second chances to demonstrate success. Do you agree with this strategy? What do some critics have to

say about it? In your opinion, what is the purpose of a grade, and are second chances fair?

Chapter 2

Involving Students in the Classroom Assessment Process

By Anne Davies

1. The author presents four cornerstones for thoughtfully and deliberately involving students in the classroom assessment process. What are these cornerstones?
2. What are the two types of quality feedback for learning? Which type do you use most often in your classroom or school and why?
3. The author claims that students learn more when they understand the goals they are expected to achieve—when the learning destination is clear and defined. How can teachers help students define their learning destinations?
4. The author gives several examples of involving students as partners in the learning process.
 - One example is challenging students to co-create criteria. Do you believe your students can rise to this challenge?
 - Another example is using samples to strengthen learning. What do you believe samples should show?

5. The author proposes a model for multiplying feedback (figure 2, page 47). Does the feedback in your classroom resemble any of the lines in the figure? If so, which one? How could you move to a system of more productive feedback in your classroom?

6. How do your students collect, select, reflect, and present evidence of their learning, and how does this differ from your experiences as a student?

Chapter 3

Assessment *for* Learning: An Essential Foundation of Productive Instruction

By Rick Stiggins

1. To what extent do you differentiate among the information needs of various assessment users at different levels of instructional decision-making in your school or district? That is, do your assessment systems really serve the needs of all your assessment users?

2. Have you assured the quality of your achievement expectations by (a) focusing on clear standards, (b) organizing them in appropriate learning progressions to unfold within and across grade levels over time, and (c)

deconstructing each standard into the scaffolding students must climb to attain mastery?

3. Do all of your assessments, including day-to-day classroom assessments, produce dependably accurate information about student achievement?
4. Do your systems for communicating assessment results support student learning?
5. Do you involve students in the classroom assessment, record-keeping, and communication processes?
6. Do you balance assessment *for* learning with assessment *of* learning?

Chapter 4

Common Formative Assessments:

The Centerpiece of an Integrated Standards-Based Assessment System

By Larry Ainsworth

1. According to the author, how often should busy educators be administering common formative assessments *for* learning, and what should they be doing with the data they receive from these assessments?

2. The author underscores the value of aligning in-school common formative assessments with district and state assessments. How do you see this happening in your own school system?
3. How does the author present common formative assessments as playing a central role in an integrated standards-assessment system?
4. What is “predictive value” as described by the author? How can assessments *for* learning provide predictive value for busy teachers?
5. The author cites many benefits for regularly administering common formative assessments. Name and describe two or three benefits that you think would have the greatest impact on improving student achievement in your own educational setting.
6. How does the author emphasize the relationship between “unwrapped” Power Standards and the design of common formative assessments?
7. Which of the author’s suggestions for getting started in implementing common formative assessments make the most sense for you to follow?

Chapter 5

Designing a Comprehensive Approach to Classroom Assessment

By Robert J. Marzano

1. According to the author, what is the most effective type of feedback for students and why?
2. The author cites research claiming that the systemic use of classroom assessments has a strong positive affect on student achievement. Why is this so?
3. Step one of the author's five-step process for designing and implementing a comprehensive approach to classroom assessment is to reconstitute state and national standards. Are these standards an impediment in your school or district? What problems do you face?
4. Step two is designing a scale that measures learning over time and rewriting standards according to the scale. How does grading on such a scale benefit students and teachers?
5. What is a "value-added" approach to judging student performance?
6. The author provides several tools that show learning over time. What tools do you use, and do they show student progress toward learning goals? How could you create these tools?

7. The author argues that report cards should be redesigned. Do you agree? What challenges would this present to your school?

Chapter 6

The Last Frontier: Tackling the Grading Dilemma

By Ken O'Connor

1. How does the author define grading?
2. What are the author's criticisms of traditional grading? Do you agree or disagree with these criticisms?
3. Clarity about purpose is critical to any activity because purpose provides us with direction. What does the author say is the primary purpose of grades? Do you agree?
4. What are the author's general beliefs about grading? Do you agree or disagree with these beliefs?
5. The author contrasts traditional and standards-based grading. Does this help advance your thinking about how grades should be determined?
6. Compare the eight guidelines the author presents to what is actually happening in your school or district. What would you need to do to be

able to implement these guidelines at a classroom, school, or district level?

7. Why are these guidelines not commonly implemented in many schools across North America, especially in middle schools, high schools, and colleges?
8. The author suggests that these guidelines will make grades accurate, meaningful, consistent, and supportive of learning. Do you agree?

Chapter 7

The Journey Toward Effective Assessment for English Language Learners

By Lisa Almeida

1. Does your school or district adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching English language learners (ELLs), or do you consider the linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, and cognitive needs of each individual student as described by the author?
2. What are the stages of language acquisition the author describes? Consider your ELL student population. Where do your students fall on the spectrum? How could you assess their stages?

3. What are some functions that impact ELLs' ability to learn? Are any of these issues at your school? How can you better accommodate these factors?
4. According to the author, large-scale standardized assessments are not usually adequate to provide valid data on ELL students. Why is this, and why are authentic or performance-based assessments better?
5. The author describes five critical components for preparing ELLs and teachers for success. Do these critical components exist in your school?
6. The author lists 12 practical strategies for assessing English language learners. Which of these would most benefit your students?
7. The author offers eight tasks that are part of a system of policies, programs, and transitional services that address many barriers impacting students' achievement in school. Which of these are most critical for your students and why?

Chapter 8
Crossing the Canyon:
Helping Students With Special Needs Achieve Proficiency
By Linda A. Gregg

1. According to the author, why are traditional, large-scale assessments not sufficient to guide the instruction of special needs students?
2. What do effective informal classroom assessments do to support special needs students?
3. What is “unwrapping” a standard and how does it help us target instruction and assessment for special needs students? Choose one of your content standards to practice unwrapping.
4. The author argues teachers must first determine the purpose of the assessment before choosing the assessment method. What are some of the reasons you assess special needs students? Are the reasons more complex than with regular education students?
5. What are some of the informal classroom assessment strategies the author describes? How could you integrate these strategies into your classroom? Do you use others that she does not mention?

6. The author describes the data team meeting process. Do you meet with colleagues on a regular basis in a collaborative and structured way to discuss effective teaching and learning for special needs students?

Chapter 9

Content *Then* Process: Teacher Learning Communities in the Service of Formative Assessment

By Dylan Wiliam

1. Why does the author emphasize that content (what needs to change) must come before process (how to effect that change)?
2. What are the three generations of school effectiveness research the author identifies? What are the prevailing views in your district?
3. Why do you think that class-size reduction programs appear to have had such a small effect on student achievement?
4. What are the author's criticisms of coaching in schools?
5. What reasons does the author give for the need to distinguish between strategies and techniques?
6. For each of the five principles of teacher change the author identifies (gradualism, flexibility, choice, accountability, and support), think of an

example from your own experience where failure to attend to the principle derailed the reform.

7. How does the author's approach to learning communities differ from those of others (such as DuFour and Schmoker)?

Chapter 10

Data on Purpose: Due Diligence to Increase Student Achievement

By Stephen White

1. What is "data on purpose," and how does it differ from the traditional ways data has been collected and used in schools? What are the differences between second- and first-order change?
2. What are the four types of data the author describes in the chapter? How do they differ? According to the author, which is the least prevalent in schools today? Does your school collect and analyze these four types of data?
3. As a leader, how many of the 10 powerful acts of leadership are part of your priorities?
4. How does the author define triangulation? Why do educators use this strategy? What types of questions might educators ask themselves when triangulating data?

5. How does the author define “due diligence”? Of what three areas does it require examination?

Chapter 11

Challenges and Choices: The Role of Educational Leaders in Effective Assessment

By Douglas Reeves

1. The author begins with three claims:
 - Feedback must be accurate and timely.
 - Inaccurate feedback is counterproductive.
 - Current practices are, to put it charitably, inconsistent.

Are these claims consistent with your observations in your learning community? If so, what examples can you think of that support these claims? If your experience is different, how do your personal observations vary from these claims about feedback?

2. The author claims that students who are inattentive in class are often remarkably focused on electronic games because these games provide feedback that is accurate, specific, and timely. How can we apply the lessons of electronic games and other instances of effective feedback to improve teaching and learning in our classrooms? Are there examples in your school of students receiving effective feedback?

3. Grading policies and practices can lead to feedback that is effective or counterproductive. Considering the author's comments and those of O'Connor in chapter 6, which grading practices in your school should be reviewed?

Consider an action research project on improved grading practices. What would be your hypothesis (an "if . . . then" statement) about a change in grading policies and practices leading to different student results? Describe how you might plan and execute an action research project for improved grading practices.

4. The author suggests that educational leaders have no perfect options, but rather must consider trade-offs where one value and objective is elevated explicitly over another. These trade-offs are:
 - Power standards or frantic coverage
 - Practical utility or psychometric perfection
 - Primacy of literacy or pursuit of popularity
 - Collaboration or "the blob"
 - Evidence or tradition

In your opinion, which trade-offs are appropriate? Which would be most challenging in your school environment?

5. The chapter closes with a powerful appeal to change attitudes through action. What is your experience with how professional attitudes

change? Is it imperative to first have buy-in, and then wait for attitudes and actions to change, or is it more important for actions and behavior change to happen first, and then wait for attitudes and beliefs to change?

Epilogue

Once Upon a Time: A Tale of Excellence in Assessment

By Richard DuFour

1. The author describes a model of assessment in a school setting. Is the situation described in this scenario desirable? How does the reality of the model school differ for your own school setting?
2. Is the model a feasible one?
3. What steps would a school take to make this model their standard practice?