



## ASSESSMENT INTEGRITY SERIES

# Meeting Students Where They Are

Want to help a student grow? Find out where to start.

Education is often described as the great equalizer. It is a force that can open opportunities for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances. It can fulfill the American promise that personal initiative can open new worlds. Yet students in today's schools are hardly uniform, and many have circumstances that put them at a disadvantage. This is especially true for students from fragile populations. A few statistics paint a picture of the disparity:

- 22% of all children in the U.S.—some 16 million kids—live at or below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly 1.2 million students were homeless in 2012, 85% more than were reported prior to the recession that began in 2008.<sup>2</sup>
- The dropout rate for students living in poverty is 4.5 times greater than for students in higher income brackets.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2013, nearly 60% of all fourth- and eighth-graders were considered “not proficient” in reading and mathematics as measured by their end-of-year state assessments.<sup>4</sup>

It's clear that not only are economic gaps between children real and growing, but that those gaps have a profound impact on academic performance. To deliver on the promise of education as an equalizing force, America's teachers and administrators need to know where their students are starting their school journeys—to meet each student wherever he or she is—and have the tools to measure growth along the way.

### Assessment Results Help Focus Efforts

A school system has many kinds of questions to answer. Teachers need to know where their particular students are starting and how they are growing toward goals—plus instructional information to move the student forward and differentiate instruction so all students learn. Principals need to understand how each class is performing and how the school as a whole is tracking toward established benchmarks. District administrators want to see overall trends and make sure the district is on track to meet accountability requirements.

No single assessment can meet all of these purposes—nor should it. Using multiple measures allows educators to cross-check their data and answer different educational questions with the appropriate tools. But when it comes to driving individual learning, especially for fragile populations,

formative and interim assessments have a critical role to play in providing the information educators need to close achievement gaps. To understand where all students are on their learning path, an adaptive assessment can be an invaluable tool, provided it meets certain criteria: measuring growth regardless of grade and gathering data efficiently.

### Beyond grade measurement

To understand the disparities among students—to measure the gap—the assessment must be able to measure students who are performing on, above, or below grade level. There is a place for understanding grade level proficiency (in fact, federal accountability frameworks demand it), but to actually teach each student as he or she is, today, the teacher needs to know where the starting line is.



Adaptive tests, which adjust with each test question, provide the clearest picture of that starting line. Many tests adapt only after several items have been presented, which does not return the same precision as a test that adjusts in real time in reaction to every single student response. In addition to this true adaptivity, the test also needs a deep pool of items to draw from in order to ensure that students are seeing new questions with appropriate depth of knowledge each time they take a test. And of course, an assessment must use a stable scale, which is the only way to accurately show a student's growth over time, regardless of grade level performance.

### Assessment efficiency

Efficient assessment is also crucial to meeting students where they are because it returns actionable data without sacrificing instructional time. Efficiency also refers to obtaining quality and precise data from the assessment instance. Do not sacrifice accurate data with shorter tests, as they could give incorrect information about what students know and are ready to learn. Adaptive tests—like Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) interim assessments—can pinpoint student growth and instructional needs accurately in a relatively short amount of time. MAP assessments take about an hour, and give students and educators information they can immediately use to move learning forward.

- Students immediately see how they scored on the test.
- Teachers see how the class is performing and can use this information to set goals with students, create flexible groups to differentiate instruction, and communicate with parents.
- Principals get a view of their entire school and can direct resources to meet specific needs.
- District administrators can see how each school is performing and make adjustments based on reliable information.

In an era of tight budgets, and large and varied classes, this efficiency brings exceptional value. When teachers have high-quality information about each student's actual learning needs, regardless of grade placement, they can make heroic growth possible for all kids.

**This article is the first in the eight-part series called "Assessment Integrity." In the next article, we'll explore the importance of norms and norming. Learn more about how you can use assessments with integrity to measure student growth at [NWEA.org](http://NWEA.org). [Learn more.](#)**

Northwest Evaluation Association™ (NWEA™) has nearly 40 years of experience helping educators accelerate student learning through computer-based assessment suites, professional development offerings, and research services. Visit [NWEA.org](http://NWEA.org) to find out how NWEA can partner with you to help all kids learn.

#### References:

1. Source: Kids Count Data Center, Children in Poverty
2. Source: Paulson, Amanda, "Record Number of Homeless Children," Sept. 23, 2014, Christian Science Monitor web
3. Source: American Psychological Association, 2014. "Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children and Youth"
4. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

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