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Implementing benchmark testing for formative purposes: teacher voices about what works.

Educ. Assess. Eval. Account. 27, No. 4, 347-375 (2015).

Summary: In response to US accountability policies and yearly performance targets, school districts are implementing periodic or benchmark assessments to provide teachers with data to improve instruction and student achievement. The tests are typically given quarterly to track student progress toward yearly accountability goals, as well as to inform teaching and identify individualized instructional enhancements to foster student achievement. Fifteen focus group sessions were conducted with 67 elementary and middle school teachers from several school districts surrounding an urban metropolitan area in Virginia to explore and better understand the ways in which benchmark testing can be used effectively as formative assessment. Participants had a range of experience from 1 to 3 to over 20 years in the classroom. The perceived quality of test items, timeliness in receiving results, accessibility of the data, and opportunities to review and discuss the results with others clearly influenced how teachers' used the assessment results. Teachers described using benchmark test results formatively to make a variety of instructional adjustments, including modifications to whole class instruction, working with students in small groups, and providing individualized support, though important factors influenced the extent of use. The findings of this study suggest that under appropriate conditions, including having valid and transparent test items, support, immediacy of results, and time to discuss with others, benchmark testing programs have the potential of providing meaningful formative assessment.

Classification: D60

Keywords: accountability testing; benchmark testing; formative assessment; large-scale assessment

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