

# **The Trickle-down Theory Behind Teacher Assessment Systems: Amplifying Teacher Choice and Voice**

## **Rationale**

IMPACT, the evaluation tool created in the early 2000's, has been a contentious measurement for teacher "effectiveness" within the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Part of IMPACT focuses on the Teacher Assessment System (TAS); which accounts for 15 percent towards the teacher's final "assessment" and consists of two parts for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. Students must improve on their reading comprehension through the Reading Inventory (RI) test and show improvement on their writing based on the PARCC Rubric. TAS scores do not just affect English teachers. Administrator's goals are also tied to TAS. There's a growing incentive for teachers and administrators to manipulate the system as it works for both interested parties. Teachers evaluate students on RI multiple times and tend to grade lower in the beginning of the year on writing samples to justify inflated scores at the end of the year. This process disallows students the opportunity to show authentic growth.

A "trickle-down" effect for TAS is created in this environment. When teachers have students performing well, administration benefits. These unintended consequences of TAS prompted a deeper exploration into how TAS could be reinvented to amplify teacher voice and choice in demonstrating student growth.

This paper examines potential faults in TAS, examines other demonstrable ways for showing student mastery of skills, and offers recommendations in reimagining TAS.

## **Literature Review**

Hall and Simeral (2015) contend that "We must capitalize on every precious moment if we are to convert today's visions and dreams into tomorrow's reality." Teachers should then have the opportunity to be reflective on what students have accomplished, what they need to improve upon, and the ability to set aspirational goals. A continuum of learning and self-reflection should happen and is missed in the state of our current TAS. "Assessment tools are varied and must be matched to the task and purpose: student observations, performance assessments, surveys, quizzes, and other methods of data collection inform the teacher of the degree to which Teaching Strategy A resulted in Student Learning B" (Hall and Simeral, 2015). RI and writing samples are just one picture of a child's learning and children should not continuously be characterized by data points.

Former teacher mentor Chandler-Olcott (2019) emphasizes that (most) literature focused on the teaching of writing has (continued) to be a solo experience, yet there is potential to change that narrative. In her study: "Teachers in higher-performing schools collaborated with one another and with school leaders to analyze the tests to which they were accountable and then design lessons that integrated those skills into existing curriculum rather than treating test preparation as an add-on." Her work focusing on students completing authentic, essential question-based writing has great potential to be brought into the everyday classroom and could be more powerful for students than a prompt disconnected to their lives.

Student demonstration of mastery of skills is what is in contention. Tucker and Stronge (2005) examined four different research-based methodologies across the nation and DCPS has incorporated many of these over the years. These methods include standards-based work, work samples, goal setting, and value-added assessments. Tucker and Stronge (2005) further state “as we attempt to link learning with teacher effectiveness, it is important to remember that tests and other types of student assessments have the potential for benefit or misuse. But, as educators we must actively embrace the possibilities of using student achievement measures as a tool, one of many, to make education more meaningful and productive for students of all ability levels.” If we are to truly use current student assessments, there needs to be changes made in evaluation and scope of what is assessed.

### **Data/Tools/Process/Methodology**

Out of the surveyed respondents (29), a little less than half (45 percent) knew their administrator’s TAS goals were their own and yet 60 percent of responders did not have a conversation about the assessments used for measurement. 79 percent of respondents further stated that a writing sample and the Reading Inventory test were the “assessments of choice.” Nearly 80 percent of responders stated that they would like to create their own evaluative tool measuring student growth.

The anecdotal information is worth noting. Respondents were asked what happens in the middle of the year when a student is not on track to not meet their growth goals. Many stated that conversations with administrators at that point simply do not happen. Others said, “responsibility for student growth is ‘on them.’” One said, “My evaluator has never helped me problem solve for middle of year.” This comment highlights the need for remediation plans that affect both teacher and administrator’s IMPACT. If these assessments are designed to be beneficial for teachers, administrators, and students, it is imperative we make recommended changes.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations should occur if TAS is to be used as true student measurements:

1. There should be dialogue between teacher and administrator concerning tools used to measure student progress towards mastery.
2. Paired with an evaluator’s observation cycle, student support plans should be created so that a safety net is in place so all students can be successful by the end of the year.
3. Teachers must have autonomy in choosing measuring tools that demonstrate mastery. The present measuring tools are insufficient in providing a true picture of student growth. The RI test is flawed as a growing number of teachers can manipulate the data. Using a PARCC aligned writing sample is another flawed system as there is potential to score students intentionally low at the beginning of the year thereby creating another chance for data manipulation.
4. A portfolio-based assessment system, providing a holistic evidence of standards-based mastery would show growth and true measurement of student progress.

## References

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- Tucker, P. D., & Stronge, J. H. (2005). *Linking teacher evaluation and student learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.