

[Education Week's blogs](#) > [Assessing the Assessments](#)

Duct Tape Won't Fix Formative Assessments

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Today's guest contributor is **Steven Ladd**, Superintendent, Elk Grove Schools, California

Beside the hammer mentioned in [the blog by Kingston](#), the other widely used and multi-faceted tool in most toolboxes is duct tape. When standardized test results for individual students are taped together--figuratively speaking--as a means of examining student performance, educators receive a macro view. Looking at mean grade-level scores of students is helpful as a way to reveal aggregate student trend data. But aggregate data reports don't help teachers know what individual students need. Kingston's commentary that standardized tests are misguided as a tool for informing instruction is right on point.

How students are assessed fundamentally drives the way in which teachers plan and deliver instruction. If we accept the fact that one of the most significant aspects of the new Common Core State Standards is assessment, then we acknowledge the critical need to ensure that assessments add value to the teaching and learning process.

Teachers are now incorporating the Common Core State Standards into their lessons, re-designing how they will present content, and changing how they will assess their students' academic performance. In doing so, if they are to continue to differentiate instruction in the classroom, then teacher-developed assessments will be even more essential.

It is, therefore, critically important to understand that while there should be, and likely will be, professional development to support teachers in the development of assessments aligned to Common Core State Standards, that is the beginning not the end of the task of ensuring the success of the Common Core. If the federal and state governments and foundations that have supported the Common Core want to protect their investment, they must understand that more professional learning will be necessary to ensure that the assessments guide instruction. Our teachers deserve a lot of support as they learn how to tie assessment to their daily work.

Newly developed assessments must be constructed in a manner that informs instruction. Dr. Kingston sheds light on how new assessments may be developed with the use of the Cognitively Based Assessment of Learning (CBAL) as one research initiative. The Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment developed at the University of Kansas represents an exciting new approach that uses the principles of CBAL to deliver assessments aimed at informing teaching and learning, at the level of the individual student.

Educators have a right to expect that Common Core assessments included in professionally produced curriculum materials (such as textbooks, supplemental materials, and standardized tests) incorporate design elements such as those introduced at the University of Kansas. Professional materials may evolve to include supports that would serve both to define what students did (and did not) understand and to identify strategies that teachers could employ to re-introduce and fortify student knowledge of specific content.

Such an approach, far from replacing a teacher, would work as a tool to strengthen assessment. In the end, the shift in design would add value to learning.

Assessments are designed to be both formative as well as summative. This is one area where hammers and duct tape won't suffice. There is no benefit to hammering out or taping together standardized tests that haven't been designed to guide instruction. New challenges provide new opportunities. That's true for standards. It's true for educators. And it should be true for the people developing assessments as well.

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