Rhetoric aside, the students in our schools can do better. While there is evidence that students today perform as well as, or better than, their historical peers (e.g., McQuillan, 1998), it seems reasonable to suggest even higher levels of achievement can be expected. In response to these increased expectations, accountability systems have focused attention on content standards and assessment systems.

Educators across the country are talking about the state standards and the ways in which they are assessed. It’s hard to imagine a teacher, student, administrator, or parent who hasn’t been touched by “adequate yearly progress.” Interestingly, educators are also realizing that the definition of proficient and the percentage of students that must be proficient vary widely across the country. But I digress. As a profession, we need systems to ensure that standards are linked with the assessments and the instruction students receive. Simply teaching to the test will not result in radically improved achievement. Similarly, buying a new “program,” regardless of how good it may be, will not get the results our students deserve.

Those in our profession know that the reading achievement of youth is profoundly influenced by quality instruction. In fact, several researchers (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1999; Joyce & Showers, 2002) suggest that the professional development of teachers is critically linked to student achievement and literacy levels of students. I believe that this professional development must be focused on specific factors related to improved academic achievement. First, we must hold high expectations for ourselves and our students, and communicate those expectations to the community. There is ample evidence that raising expectations—and teaching to those expectations—will result in improved achievement. Second, we must ensure that adolescents see themselves and others in what they read. Known as the “mirror and window” function of literature, our reading selections should reflect the students in our classes as well as provide them an opportunity to meet people and visit places that they otherwise would not be able to access. Third, we know that it takes a whole school focus on literacy to radically improve achievement. English teachers play a critical and pivotal role in literacy achievement, and the content teachers who integrate literacy instructional strategies hold the key to making literacy a lifelong endeavor in every field (Ivey & Fisher, in press). Finally, we must link our instruction to assessments based on content standards. By closely examining student work, alone and with our colleagues, we can better allocate our instructional interventions. This process—examining student work collaboratively—is the focus of this article.

It is important to see the linking of standards, assessments, and instruction as a process of professional development that leads to improved teaching and learning. It is based on evidence that groups of teachers reviewing student work together results in improved achievement (Langer, Colton, & Goff, 2003). Let’s consider the ways in which the process of linking standards, assessment, and instruction is used in a middle school. Figure 1 (p. 10) contains an overview of this process.
Collaborative Analysis and Instructional Planning

Welcome to John Adams Middle School (JAMS) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This school educates over 870 students in grades 6–8, 76% of whom qualify for free lunch. Of these, 82% are Latino, 10% are Anglo, 4% are Native American, 3% are African-American, and 1% are Asian/Pacific Islander. The achievement gap at this school, compared with middle schools that educate mostly white students, is notable. In addition to achievement gaps, there are differences in the number of students who drop out (3% compared with the district average of 1%) and attendance (92% compared with the district average of 95%).

While it would have been easy to focus on the increasing rates of poverty at JAMS or diminishing parent support or lack of appropriate preparation from the elementary school, the teachers at JAMS wanted to improve student achievement and close the gap. To that end, they agreed to implement a process for examining content standards, planning instruction, and re-teaching.

The first common assessment event was scheduled for seven weeks into the school year. Each grade level, 6–8, developed its own assessment that included questions from English/language arts, math, science, social studies, and bilingual education. In addition, every student in the school responded to a common writing prompt.

Over a two-year period, the teachers at John Adams wrote and administered eight common assessments across content areas and met to discuss the results of each. Each common assessment also included a writing prompt. Let’s watch and listen as groups of teachers at two different grade levels analyze the fourth of the common assessments.

Teacher Talk

A group of sixth-grade teachers are discussing a question that asks, “Which statement summarizes the passage?” The assessment required that students read a short passage to answer several questions—not unlike the state assessment that students will take in the spring. While the majority of students selected the correct answer, a large number selected instead a fact that was identified in the story. During the teachers’ discussion, the conversation focused on the difference between fact, opinion, and summary, all of which were taught during the previous six weeks. One of the teachers suggested, “Maybe we should change the pacing guide and not teach fact and opinion with summaries. Maybe that’s just too confusing for them.” Another teacher asked for data on which students missed the question—“What do we know about them?”

Simply teaching to the test will not result in radically improved achievement.

The peer coach reviewed the aggregate data and the student group data and reported that over 2/3 of the students that missed the question were in beginning or early intermediate levels of English fluency. Another teacher asked, “Why are they missing that question then? Are the instructions confusing? Maybe they don’t know the word ‘summarizes.’” The teachers talked about this at length and concluded that they needed to provide this group of students with additional opportunities for answering these kinds of questions. They quickly discussed a variety of ways that English learners could be taught the differences between fact, opinion, and summary before moving on to the writing samples.

After scoring the writing samples based on the prompt “Write a letter to the principal that outlines your feelings about the school uniform policy,” the sixth-grade teachers noted the consistent lack of paragraphs in their students’ writing. They expressed significant concern about this and discussed ways to focus on paragraphs and idea units. As one of the sixth-grade teachers noted, “They’ll never write like their counterparts across town if they write one long paragraph. We have to teach them how to divide up their ideas and share them more effectively if they are going to achieve on par with other students.”

Meanwhile, on the same day, a group of eighth-grade teachers is discussing the common
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Assessment they gave. They are most concerned that just under half of their students could not identify the elements of a short story. One of the teachers said, “I never really taught the elements. I thought that the pacing guide was about teaching short stories. I read a lot of short stories with my classes, but I never really talked with them about the elements. Are the elements in the standards?"

While the faces of some of the teachers in the room clearly indicated their frustration, they talked with their colleague about the standards and expectations for students. As one of them very nicely said, “We can’t close the gap between what they know and what they are expected to know if we don’t teach them.” The conversation then turned to how to teach and re-teach this content with teachers helping one another think about instructional approaches and materials that they could use.

As they completed their conversation on the multiple-choice items, they began to score the writing prompt. In this case, students were asked to “describe your ideal crib” (house, condo, apartment, or other living environment). They chose to experiment with slang in the prompt to deter-

**Figure 1:** A Process for Linking Standards, Assessment, and Instruction

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**Step 1: Develop Pacing Guides.** Pacing guides, developed by the teachers who teach the classes, provide an overall structure for the course. Pacing guides allow teachers to review their content standards and decide how much time should be devoted to each standard. Typically, pacing guides include the standards to be taught, instructional materials aligned to those standards, instructional strategies useful in teaching the standards, and a timeline.

**Step 2: Develop Common Assessments.** Like pacing guides, common or benchmark assessments should be developed by the teachers who teach the specific courses. Teachers can use materials provided by publishers and other sources to create their assessment items, of course, but the power of designing these common assessments lies in the opportunity for groups of teachers to review their content standards and determine the various ways in which their students can demonstrate their knowledge. While these common assessments provide for integrated test format practice by providing students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding in modes that they are expected to use in state accountability systems (e.g., multiple choice and on-demand writing), they can also include more authentic tasks and modes that allow teachers to get at students’ comprehension and thinking skills. The common assessment is given to every student who takes the class, not just specific sections of the course (e.g., all sixth-grade English classes or seventh-grade science classes).

**Step 3: Teach and Assess.** With the pacing guide and the common assessment in place, teachers are ready to teach. Consistent with the backwards planning model proposed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005), these steps ensure that teachers know what they expect from students before they begin teaching. In addition, the conversations that teachers have with other teachers regarding student work often become structured discussions about teaching and learning. This process may increase the likelihood that teachers share effective instructional approaches with one another and reduce the use of less-effective instructional interventions.

**Step 4: Collaboratively Score the Assessments.** As the unit of study comes to a close and students complete the common or benchmark assessment, teachers are ready for the discussion of student performance. But first, someone must compile the data. Typically, this is a peer coach, Title 1 coordinator, or vice principal. The assessment results are first compiled in aggregate with the data from all of the students combined. Data charts are then created for specific groups of students, such as English learners, students with disabilities, African-Americans, or boys. An item analysis for the assessment should also be created. The item analysis provides teachers with the percentage of students who chose each answer so that they can discuss students’ misunderstandings of the question or content. Following the discussion of the aggregate data and the analysis of subgroups, teachers are provided with the data from their own classes.

**Step 5: Revise and Re-teach.** Based on the result of the collaborative assessment and discussion, groups of teachers may decide that the assessment or pacing guide needs revision. Alternatively, they may decide that there are specific standards—that their students do not know and that they must re-teach. The follow-up conversation centers on increasing mastery of the content and effective ways for doing so.
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mine if it would make students more interested. The papers were scored using a four-point rubric. The peer coach reported that the number of students scoring a 1 had decreased by 50%, so the teachers started a conversation about why that might be. Their ideas centered around the professional development they had received in writing instruction and systematic, purposeful approaches to teaching writing. They also noted the difference in students’ reactions when “their language is used in class and on assignments.” This, in turn, generated a conversation about scaffolding students’ language use to conventional registers.

As this conversation ended, the peer coach randomly selected a student paper from the pile of papers assessed at 2, passed it around, and asked her colleagues what type of instruction this student needed to move to the next level. The conversation ranged from expanding the students’ vocabulary to providing the student with writing models from which he/she could draw. They agreed that this particular student, who used a number of fragments and run-on sentences, needed individualized instruction in sentence construction from a language arts teacher.

Conclusions

The statistics on adolescent literacy achievement are clear—this is a national problem. The problem is especially pronounced in terms of the achievement gaps between students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. However, the data represent the stories of our past. We cannot afford to allow the patterns of the past to dictate the future. It’s time to invest in our students’ future and ensure that all students are equipped to become contributing citizens of our global village. By linking standards, assessments, and instruction, we can identify areas of need for specific students and address those needs. We can also use this process as an authentic opportunity for professional development. Collaboratively examining student learning and performance allows teachers to engage with their content standards, design and critique assessments, and plan instruction.

References


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