

Creating Common Core-Aligned Assessments: A Teacher-Led Process

District Spotlight: Stamford, Connecticut

High school English teacher Katharine Tobin compares teachers' assessment needs to the needs of doctors treating their patients. "How can you treat the individual if you don't know where they are starting from, or where they "are" at any given moment?" She asserts that just as medical professionals have agreed upon healthy goals for weight, temperature and heart rate, so must education professionals agree upon learning goals for their students.

Across the country, districts are aligning their curricula to the Common Core State Standards and are recognizing the need for assessments to reflect the changes teachers are making in the classroom. The Assessment Evaluation Tool (AET) and the Checklist (tools designed by non-profit Student Achievement Partners) are designed to help educators and administrators determine whether their grade-level assessments or sets of assessments are aligned to the Shifts and major features of the Common Core State Standards. The Stamford Public School District in Connecticut used aspects of the AET to guide their work in creating assessments designed by teachers in the district.

Taking Charge of Curriculum and Assessments at the District Level

After Connecticut adopted the Common Core Standards, Stamford chose to have its teachers play a primary role in designing a new, aligned curriculum and the assessments that accompanied it. Carrie Chiappetta, Director for School Improvement/PD at the Secondary level, explained that aligned interim assessments help teachers determine what students have mastered so teachers can adjust instruction and provide additional support as needed. She also sees value in having high quality interim assessments to provide students with the opportunity to experience aligned-assessments prior to an end-of-year summative assessment. For any district, incorporating an assessment process that is aligned to the work being done in the classroom is a critical element of reflecting on instructional practice to determine if current methods are effective.

Stamford saw teacher involvement in the development as critical: "Teachers needs to be a part of the process or else they will feel that things are being done TO them," Chiappetta said. Stamford understood that the process of developing assessments had an added benefit: it was an opportunity for teachers to learn and collaborate together, deepening their understanding of the Common Core. Students are the ultimate beneficiaries of this process since the teachers involved will bring back their knowledge and apply it to their primary focus: classroom instruction. These teachers can also act as ambassadors, explaining issues of Common Core alignment to their colleagues.

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The AET is a practical tool for the assessment development process. It allows teachers to have a clear understanding of the elements of assessments aligned to the Common Core. Working with a list of criteria, teachers can highlight flaws, weaknesses or gaps in assessments as well as identify elements which *must* be present in order for an assessment to properly reflect students' progress in meeting the Common Core State Standards.

Becoming Experts in the Common Core

The first step in designing new assessments was to have the Curriculum Associates (for math and literacy) who would be leading the development work, attend professional development sessions such as the GE Immersion Institutes and other Common Core-focused conferences. This training allowed them to transfer the knowledge to the teachers who would make up the curriculum development committee. Curriculum Associate for secondary literacy, Heather Corrente, has been instrumental in the district's work around Common Core. Heather has attended professional development sessions to learn about Common Core, met with consultants, has planned and delivered professional development to teachers, and also facilitates the curriculum work with the teachers.

Katharine Tobin was one of the teachers that took part in the committee. When she received a district-wide email inviting teachers to help draft the new curriculum and assessments, she knew she wanted to be involved and had expertise to share. She and her fellow committee members took part in an intensive Common Core training session to ensure they had a strong understanding of the Shifts and content of the Standards. The training encouraged teachers to look at their own classroom practice to see how it was supporting the Common Core.

Tobin found many parts of the training reassuring; hearing what was needed to keep students on track with the Standards, she'd think to herself "okay, you're doing that already; this isn't a whole new thing." The process opened her eyes, however, to how different the experiences of students were across the district – varying dramatically from school to school and teacher to teacher. She was excited to design a curriculum to help every student in the district have the same exposure to strong instruction and content.

Building New Assessments in Math and ELA

Stamford's first step in developing its own assessments was to determine what had to be *different*. How would these assessments better serve students than previous ones? Assessment experts from Student Achievement Partners met with the Stamford administration to discuss how they could use the criteria in the AET and Checklists to make assessments more beneficial. They dealt with topics ranging from how long an assessment should be, to what types of questions an assessment should include. They focused on a clear goal: crafting questions that mattered; questions worthy of students' attention. Assessments focused on

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the topics that matter most for future success; rewarding instructional decisions to focus on these important topics.

After finalizing the curriculum, the development committees for Math and ELA/literacy, used the AET to guide their work and review of the assessment sets. In Math, the reviewers met for a one-day training where they discussed the criteria and how they could be implemented in assessments. Then they set to work designing quarterly assessments. The reviewers were under a tight deadline since the assessments were needed immediately. The committee used the criteria in the AET and Checklists to determine the right amount of procedural, conceptual and application problems on assessments throughout the year as well what mathematical practices they wanted to emphasize at each grade level. For example, modeling in mathematics is critical for 7th grade math and beyond, but not as important for elementary school students, thus assessment items for the elementary level would contain fewer items that assessed modeling. Their work culminated in a set of quarterly benchmark assessments that could be used throughout the district.

In ELA/literacy, the committee used the AET to determine the necessary criteria for high quality, aligned assessments, focusing on integrating the Shifts into assessment items. Like the math committee, ELA had the goal of creating quarterly interim assessments. The group focused on created constructed response questions, where students would be asked to write their own answers. At the middle school level, the committee chose to use some of multiple choice items from Student Achievement Partners' Mini Assessments to expedite the process of creating well-rounded assessments. This is a strategy any district could use since Student Achievement Partners' resources are free and open-source. Other possible content for assessment items can be found in the Basal Alignment Project, Read Aloud Project and Anthology Alignment Project.

The ELA committee spent long hours determining what texts to include in the assessments; running every text through a range-finder and then engaging in debate around the complexity based on their experience having taught the texts in their own classrooms. They also carefully reviewed their assessment items to ensure they required students to engage deeply with the text, crafting instructions directing students to not only read, but also annotate passages during the assessment. All of the items included a 'top score response' (either an item response drafted by a teacher or a bulleted list of necessary elements) that exemplified the type of response teachers should expect from a student who was proficient in the skills being assessed.

Stamford invited Student Achievement Partners to act as a consultant during the process, guiding their use of the AET and helping with the review of the final product. Stamford recommends that other districts use outside consultants to bring a "fresh pair of eyes" and additional expertise to the review of assessments.

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Working and Learning Together

Designing their own assessments strengthened relationships across the district: both the relationship of teachers to district leaders but also among teachers from different schools. Grade level partners from different schools work together now – planning across schools occurs when it would have been impossible before. Tobin describes how, in working with her fellow teachers, she realized that many teachers felt uncomfortable teaching poetry and avoided it. Tobin, who loves poetry and teaches a unit on it every year, helped develop a unit of study, culminating in an assessment, to ensure that teachers felt capable of teaching and assessing poetry in their ELA classrooms. “We have now made sure every student will experience [poetry] every year, and every teacher has a basis to teach it from, with fear,” Tobin explains.

Teachers, even those who were not a part of the development committee, have a greater stake in the curriculum and assessments that have been developed. The committee solicits feedback after an assessment is used in the classroom – that feedback can inform improvements. Continuing the spirit of collaborative effort, teachers in the district have expressed an interest in scoring assessments together, analyzing questions and the experiences of students taking the assessments to see whether the assessments were a fair measurement of their skills.

Looking Ahead

Stamford now has a set of high-quality, aligned assessments designed by and for Stamford teachers. While this is a critical accomplishment, the work is not done yet. Stamford plans to continue to engage the Math and ELA/literacy teacher committees to strengthen their assessments, amending items that proved problematic when students took them for the first time last year. They have used the AET to assess ELA unit assessments during the 2014-2015 school year and will continue to pull student samples to make anchors and write top score responses.

The district provides guidance on how to use the new assessments in their “Year at a Glance” document, including timelines for delivering assessments throughout the course of the year. This document will help ensure assessment is a strategic part of instructional practice in the district.

Stamford plans to treat their curriculum and assessment materials as living documents – ones that “should improve each year based on teacher feedback and students samples.” Teachers will continue to lead the process of crafting, amending and structuring assessment policy in the district given its initial success.