Supporting Professional Conversations about Assessment:

A Guide for School Leaders

SECTION 2
Establishing a School-based Assessment Team

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https://aac.ab.ca/test-password-protected-page/

This DRAFT will be revised and an updated copy made available to workshop participants in hard copy in the spring of 2019. It will also be available on the AAC website.

For further information about this resource, please contact AAC.

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Rationale for Establishing a School-based Assessment Team

The new *Alberta Education Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) lists an array of responsibilities for leaders. Instructional leadership is one of the leadership competencies, and indicators relating to student assessment are nested within this competency.

As with any of the leadership competencies, the approach that a leader takes towards their responsibilities can have a direct impact on how their leadership vision is received by staff members and subsequently implemented within the school. The topic of assessment is often controversial, and a school leader needs to be able to understand diverse viewpoints, and then lead productive conversations in order to move assessment practices forward within a school.

There are many ways in which this can be accomplished. This resource outlines a process for creating a school-based assessment team. The rationale for this approach comes from a quote from *Inside the Black Box*, a meta-analysis of the research relating to formative assessment practices.

> Teachers will not take up attractive sounding ideas, albeit based on extensive research, if these are presented as general principles which leave entirely to them the task of translating them into everyday practice – their lives are too busy and too fragile for this to be possible for all but an outstanding few. What they need is a variety of living examples of implementation, by teachers with whom they can identify and from whom they can both derive conviction and confidence that they can do better, and see concrete examples of what doing better means in practice.
>
> (Black & Wiliam, 1998)

While school leaders have been given the responsibility to provide instructional leadership in assessment, it may be that classroom teachers can be the most effective ambassadors for implementing sound practices. The leader can work collaboratively with teachers to set the vision and create the structures to enable the staff to move forward.

School leaders continue to have a legislated responsibility to evaluate professional staff for whom they have responsibility. However, consider the value of a school leader approaching instructional leadership in assessment through a coaching mindset.

School leaders can support professional growth in assessment practices by
- learning more about sound assessment practices;
- providing a safe space to discuss ideas;
- listening to concerns and seeking to understand;
- discussing solutions and providing support; and
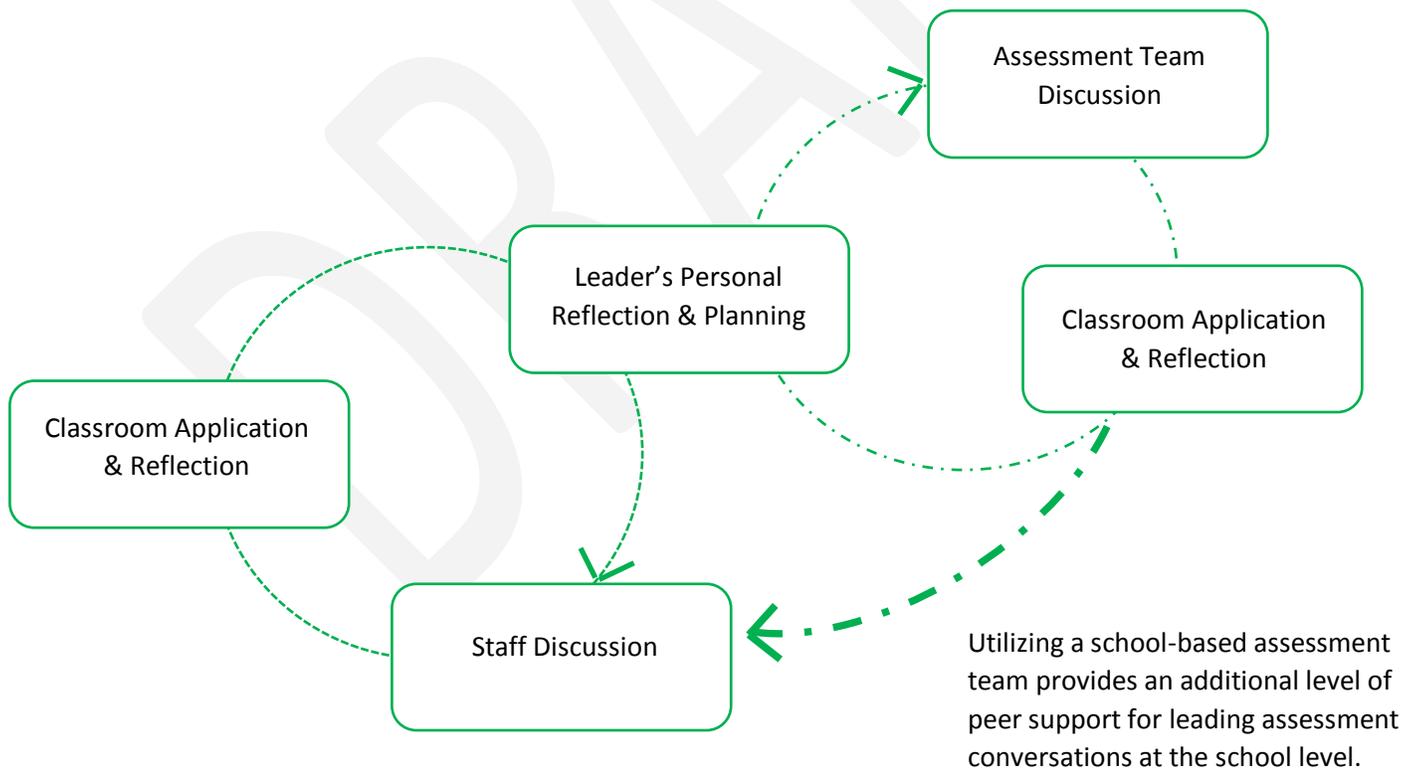- celebrating success.

By so doing, a school leader is building a culture of formative assessment within the school.

Options for Providing Instructional Leadership in Assessment

The following graphic provides a schematic representation of possible options for providing instructional leadership in assessment.

- The leader's personal reflection and planning is central to the success of this leadership endeavor.

- The cycle on the left represents a school leader's work in facilitating discussions about assessment with the entire staff. Teachers then have the responsibility to engage in classroom application of the principles discussed and to reflect on the impact of those practices on student learning. Ideally the cycle would continue, with assessment conversations occurring on a regular basis as part of staff meetings.

- The cycle on the right represents a school leader's work in convening a school-based assessment team. The process within this team is similar to what would occur within a whole-school conversation. The benefit of having an assessment team is that team members can provide a peer leadership role during whole staff conversations.

- Both cycles continue with reflections always informing next steps.

While it may seem that this approach places an inordinate focus on student assessment, time spent on enhancing school-based assessment practices will accomplish many of the other indicators within both the *Leadership Quality Standard* and the *Teaching Quality Standard*. More important, an intentional focus on classroom assessment practice will have a positive and observable impact on student learning.

Utilizing a school-based assessment team provides an additional level of peer support for leading assessment conversations at the school level.

A school leader ensures "…that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed…"

Environmental Scan

Before embarking on a plan for providing instructional leadership in assessment, consider the current context within your school in regard to assessment beliefs and practices within key stakeholder groups. The following questions could provide a starting place for reflection.

Teachers
- What conversations about assessment are taking place among the teachers at your school?
- What successes are they sharing?
- What concerns are they expressing?

Students
- What do students believe is the purpose for assessment?
- What student behaviours may be signalling an underlying assessment issue?

Parents
- What concerns are parents raising?

Leaders
- How confident are you in your understanding of classroom assessment practice as articulated by the indicators within the *Teaching Quality Standard*?
- To what extent are you confident in your ability to ensure "…that student assessment and evaluation practices are fair, appropriate, and evidence-informed?"
- To what extent are the expectations of teachers, parents and students with regard to assessment practices consistent with your own beliefs about assessment?

Assessment is often a controversial subject. It is important for a school leader to understand the context of assessment within the school in order to provide effective leadership.

Guidelines for Recruiting Assessment Team Members

Once a leader decides to embark on the process of assembling a school-based assessment team, careful consideration must be given to the make-up of that team. Assessment team members should be teachers who are informal leaders among their peers. They do not need to be the most gregarious individuals on staff, but they should have an interest in ongoing professional learning, the confidence to engage in innovative practices, and the ability to engage in reflective practice. In a secondary setting, team members could be department leaders, but they would not need to be.

While there are many possibilities for who could be part of the assessment team, there are two groups of teachers for whom participation on a school-based assessment team would not be appropriate. School leaders always retain the responsibility for growth, supervision and evaluation of the professional teaching staff, and it is important that this project clearly remain at a distance from any part of the formal process of supervision and evaluation. As such, participating as a member of a school-based assessment team is not appropriate for:
- teachers for whom you have ongoing concerns and for whom you are considering beginning the process of supervision or evaluation; and
- beginning teachers, or those who do not hold a continuous contract.

The school leader may decide to issue an invitation to all staff to express interest in participating, or they may approach individual teachers to consider participating. In all cases, assessment team members should be volunteers.

Protocols

The purpose for the school-based assessment team is to engage in professional conversation and for team members to implement various assessment methods/strategies/techniques within their own classroom. Team members should observe the impact of these practices on student learning and be prepared to share successes and challenges at subsequent team meetings and in whole school meetings.

The school leader has the responsibility to create a safe environment where team members are free to take risks with new assessment practices. Everyone is a learner within the team, including the school leader.

Confidentiality is essential within all aspects of the team. Teachers are focused on their own classroom practice. When appropriate, student names, samples of work, insights, and vignettes that demonstrate the impact of a particular assessment practice are shared respectfully and held in confidence.

Team members are encouraged to commit to the success of the team by attending regular meetings and actively seeking to implement the assessment practices within their classroom. However, if the commitment becomes unmanageable for any reason, team members are free to step down from the team without any repercussion.

At all times, the *Code of Professional Conduct* governs the activities and conversations within the team.

Suggested Meeting Framework

The framework for assessment team meetings is intentionally simple and straight-forward. Three key processes should be included in each meeting.

Check-in/Sharing
- At the first meeting, team members will introduce themselves and share their interest in participating in this team.
- At subsequent meetings, team members will share their experiences in implementing the assessment principle that was discussed at the previous meeting.

Professional Learning
- School leaders and/or team members can suggest areas of focus based on their own interest for further learning and/or a need they have recognized within their classroom.
- The AAC Assessment in Action video collection, the accompanying resource for leaders, and the AAC publication *Assessment Conversations: Engaging with Colleagues to Support Student Learning* can be used to support the professional learning conversation.

Commitment for Implementation
- Following the professional learning input and discussion, team members will make a commitment to implement the assessment principle/practice within their classroom. They may also identify any assistance they will need in order to be successful with this task.
- Discussions will take place regarding any whole school discussions/meetings that may be planned prior to the next team meeting.
- The next meeting date will be set.

Meetings do not need to be long to be effective. What is most important is that they are held regularly, and that the tone is positive and focused on learning, reflection and growth.

If you are interested in setting up a school-based assessment team, please contact AAC.

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