Make Assessment Relevant

3 Key Findings on Student Perceptions of Assessment

Wondering what students think—and know—about assessment? In 2014 Northwest Evaluation Association™ (NWEA™) commissioned a nationally representative survey that asked students, teachers, and district administrators what they thought about assessment. It’s the first time any formal study has asked students’ opinions, and their responses are making news across the country.

Below, you’ll find the highlights of what students had to say. For the full results, read Make Assessment Matter: Students and Educators Want Tests that Support Learning, an independent study conducted by Grunwald Associates LLC.

One

The vast majority of students recognize that assessment plays a valid role in their education—and in their futures. They understand that assessments, overall, are important for keeping track of what they’re learning in school.

• 95% of students agree that assessments are “very” or “somewhat” important for helping them and their teachers know if they are making progress in their learning during the year.
• 88% agree that assessments are important for setting goals for their learning.
• 94% agree that tests are important for getting into a good college.

Two

Students firmly grasp how assessment serves their learning. Students realize they take assessments to support their learning in a variety of substantive ways, including:

• evaluating performance with a grade or score
• tracking progress toward grade-level expectations
• demonstrating what they’ve learned
• clarifying what still needs to be learned
• discovering if they need extra support

Many students have a remarkably accurate understanding of the purposes and uses of classroom and state accountability tests. The majority of students see classroom tests as helpful on a number of levels, all of which provide feedback on their learning—including understanding whether they are performing at grade level expectations (57%), helping their teachers see what they have learned (55%), and notably, discovering if they need extra support (47%).

Most students (55%) believe they take state accountability tests to evaluate their schools; only 19 percent believe they take classroom tests for this purpose.

Three

Students want feedback on performance. And like other stakeholders, students want timely results!

• 89% said that after one week, assessment results are not very helpful to them or their teachers.

Student Voices

“Since [state accountability] tests do not impact us at all, it seems silly that it takes so much of our time”
— Ninth grader

“[Subject/classroom] tests tell me if I need to work on this and I need to work on that”
— Fifth grader

What do these findings tell us? Students aren’t averse to assessment as long as it serves their learning. They recognize the practical role assessment data can play in helping them demonstrate, track, and understand their learning. Finally, students want assessment to be useful to them and their teachers. This clear-sighted view of assessment comes from those closest to it.

This article is the first in a multi-part series. In the next part, we’ll explore three key ways educators can engage students in the assessment process: giving them a voice in their assessment plan; keeping them informed of upcoming changes in standards and assessments; and engaging students to use their assessment results to set learning goals.