

# THE CASE FOR GROWTH

## Why Measure Student Learning?

*Part One: Why assess at all? The Case for measuring Growth*

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The first in a  
multi-part series  
about measuring  
student growth.

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*A fundamental question – perhaps the fundamental question – educators ask is, “Are my students learning?”*

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This question reverberates throughout school systems, communities, and the nation, and to answer it, educators use many tools, all of which combine to inform a teacher’s understanding of student learning. Measuring student achievement and growth with assessments has become a key component of the answer, because, much as you might use a yardstick to measure your child’s physical growth, assessments can provide an objective, consistent measure of academic growth.

**THIS PAPER IS THE FIRST IN A THREE-PART SERIES. WE WILL EXPLORE:**

**Part One:** Why assess at all? The case for measuring growth.

**Part Two:** What it takes to measure growth fairly and accurately.

**Part Three:** How growth data can help create a virtuous learning cycle, where the data in the hands of empowered educators and students makes possible even greater gains for students.

Our goal for this series is to offer practical insights and pragmatic learning around measuring student growth to educators, parents, and policy makers, that each can use to drive learning for all students.

But first, let’s ask a more basic question.

## Part One: Why assess at all?

### ANSWERING EDUCATIONAL QUESTIONS WITH DATA

Educators use assessments to answer educational questions with data. These assessments are designed for various purposes, depending on when they are given in the instructional cycle and the needs of the stakeholder who will be using the data. Roughly, assessments fall into three broad categories:

- Formative assessments provide information in the moment to help teachers adjust instruction; this process permits educators and students to collect critical information about student progress and to uncover

opportunities for review, feedback and adjustments to instruction.

- Interim assessments provide an objective measure of student achievement, progress, and growth over time; the results can be used to differentiate instruction, allocate resources, determine placement in special programs and evaluate program effectiveness; these assessments are given at regular intervals through the school year
- Summative assessments provide a summary of student achievement after completion of an instructional unit or course, including accountability tests at the end of a semester or school year.

## MEASURING GROWTH REQUIRES MULTIPLE SNAPSHOTS

How do you measure growth? An analogy is useful here. In a time lapse film of a flower, the visual effect is created through multiple snapshots threaded together to show the plant's trajectory from bud to bloom. Student growth can be measured in a similar way, through a series of snapshots that measure achievement at a given time. Assessments, taken at different points through the year, can provide these learning snapshots, and when viewed together, show the pattern of a student's growth.

To measure academic growth in an instructionally useful way – meaning the measure provides data that enables effective grouping and differentiating instruction, an assessment should meet these conditions:

- The assessment must be built on a stable scale
- It must measure students outside of grade level parameters (above and below) to get a true reading of their achievement levels – this is crucial to effectively differentiating instruction and providing a personalized learning path, and for accurately measuring growth over time
- It must provide context for the data and insight in the moment to help teachers adjust instruction

## STUDENT GROWTH – AN URGENT CALL TO ACTION

The case for measuring growth is quite simple really, when you consider a few statistics about the state of education.

- 60 percent or more of 4th and 8th graders are not reading or doing math at grade level<sup>1</sup>
- As we've seen from recent summative assessments in New York and Kentucky associated with the Common Core State Standards, the proportion of students scoring "below proficient" will rise as new, higher standards make proficiency harder to achieve<sup>2</sup>.
- Many children live in poverty – 20.5% of 6-17 year olds and 25.9% of children 5 and under. Poverty is correlated with many challenges to

student learning, including entry in school with severely reduced vocabularies, higher dropout rates, and dropping out at earlier grades<sup>3</sup>.

None of these statistics paints a flattering picture of education in America – nor do they reflect our beliefs about creating better lives for children, closing achievement gaps, or ensuring future economic prosperity or civic engagement. To live up to our aspirations, we must give our teachers the tools they need to succeed.

If we know that up to 70% of students are not achieving "proficiency" on today's summative tests, and that tomorrow's will be based on the more demanding standards of the Common Core, it is imperative that teachers know the starting point and can follow the progress of each student. Then they can engage the student in charting an instructional path that moves toward success. Along the way, the student still may not be rated as proficient on summative assessments, but this does not mean that he or she is not growing academically.

In fact, often we see heroic growth. Consider the fifth grade student who starts the year reading at a second grade level. In June, his teacher rightfully celebrates his achievements because he is now reading like a fourth grader – still not "proficient," but growing rather remarkably.

Such growth must be made visible and made to count, for students themselves, and for our society to gain a clearer picture of what our schools accomplish every day.

**1 Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*.

**2 Source:** Khadaroo, Stacy T., "New York test scores hint at hard road ahead for Common Core," August 8, 2013 *Christian Science Monitor Web*

**3 Source:** U.S. Census Bureau. 2011. "CPS 2011 Annual Social and Economic Supplement," Table POV01.

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# KEEP THE FOCUS ON STUDENTS

*Measuring growth maximizes every child's chance for academic success.*

Students that will attend public elementary and secondary school this fall

**50.1M**

**35.3M**  
PRE-K THROUGH 8TH GRADE

**25%**

OF KIDS UNDER 5 LIVE IN POVERTY.

**4 OUT OF 10**

CHILDREN ARE NOT ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOL

**60%**

ARE BELOW PROFICIENCY IN 4TH AND 8TH GRADE READING AND MATH

FAIRLY EVALUATING EACH STUDENT'S STARTING POINT HELPS FACILITATE SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT PLANS

**DON'T FORGET: ACADEMIC GROWTH HAPPENS FOR STUDENTS EVEN WHEN THEY'RE BELOW PROFICIENCY CUTS**