Why Student-Engaged Assessment Matters
Excerpt from Leaders of Their Own Learning

The most important assessments that take place in any school building are seen by no one. They take place inside the heads of students, all day long. Students assess what they do, say, and produce, and decide what is good enough. These internal assessments govern how much they care, how hard they work, and how much they learn. They govern how kind and polite they are and how respectful and responsible. They set the standard for what is “good enough” in class. In the end, these are the assessments that really matter. All other assessments are in service of this goal—to get inside students’ heads and raise the bar for effort and quality.

Student-engaged assessment is effective because it draws on these internal assessments that occur naturally for students. Unfortunately, students and teachers often don’t know how to tap into this level of assessment and learn how to capitalize on it. Students frequently have widely varying internal standards for quality and aren’t clear about what “good enough” looks like. Some students have internalized a sense that they don’t have a value or voice in a classroom setting and that anything they do will be inferior to the work of the “smart kids.” In other cases, they believe they have only one chance to do something and begin to work from a place of compliance and completion rather than working toward quality through a series of attempts.

Teachers frequently fall into the trap of simply saying, “try harder” without giving students specific targets, feedback, time to revise, and a purpose for doing quality work. What students really need are tools and support to assess and improve their own learning and the motivation to do so. Motivation is in fact the most important result of student-engaged assessment—unless students find reason and inspiration to care about learning and have hope that they can improve, excellence and high achievement will remain the domain of a select group. The following sections describe the key reasons why student-engaged assessment practices matter.

Motivating Students to Care
Nothing is more important in fostering growth in students than the degree to which they care. Recent research suggests that student perseverance, grit, and self-discipline correlate strongly with academic success (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Dweck, Walton, & Cohen 2011; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007). This will not surprise teachers or parents—it is common sense. But these “noncognitive” strengths are entirely based on the degree to which students care about their learning and their growth. If students don’t care, they are not going to work hard.

The apathy, disconnection, or lack of self-esteem that causes students to disengage in school—to stop caring—is not inherent. It is learned behavior. Kindergartners come to school excited to learn. In the course of their schooling, however, some students lose touch with their ability to thrive in a school environment. School becomes something that is done to them, something that they are not good at. They may feel they are good at sports, music, or video games, but school is just not a place where they succeed. Their test scores and grades make this clear. Student-engaged assessment puts students back in the driver’s seat, in charge of their own success. It makes clear to them that hard work and practice pays off—just as it does for them in sports, music, or video games—and that the immediate, clear feedback they get in these other pursuits can also guide their academic progress.
Most important, student-engaged assessment supports students to do work that they are proud of, which motivates them to step up to challenges. As Mike McCarthy, principal of King Middle School in Portland, Maine, puts it, “Anytime you make the work public, set the bar high, and are transparent about the steps to make a high-quality product, kids will deliver.”

**Changing Mindsets**
Student-engaged assessment requires and inspires students and teachers to change their mindsets about intelligence, effort, and success. As they experience success and track actual progress, their positive mindsets strengthen. They recognize the connections among their attitude, effort, practice, and increased achievement. It doesn’t mean an easy ride, as the story of a third-grader struggling with reading illustrates. Her teacher, Jean Hurst, underscores the role of student-engaged assessment in changing her mindset: “Although she’s still not at grade level, she’s made two years of progress, and making that progress visible through the use of data has helped Jacelyn to become a more motivated and informed reader.” Rather than getting stuck with a view of herself as a “poor reader,” she realized that with effort and support she could and would catch up. Student-engaged assessment helps students see the connection between effort and achievement.

**Engaging Students as Leaders of Their Own Learning**
As students are given the tools to understand and assess their own strengths and challenges, their ability to take ownership increases. In very concrete ways, students become leaders of their own learning—understanding learning targets, tracking their progress, using feedback to revise their work, and presenting their learning publicly—and partners with their teachers. In our video series you will see students looking directly into the camera, explaining how student-engaged assessment practices work and how they have benefited. Their comments are genuine and unrehearsed.

**Teaching Reflection**
Skillful reflection is at the core of becoming a self-directed learner and thus is essential for college and career readiness. Student-engaged assessment builds reflection into every step of the process, ensuring that students develop the skills to reflect deeply and concretely, beyond vague statements of preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. This process can begin in kindergarten. As kindergarten teacher Jane Dunbar describes in chapter 4, “I then ask the group, ‘What would you do on the next draft if this were yours?’ And ‘What would you change?’ I challenge them for details.” Imagine the power of building this ability to reflect on drafts over years of practice.

**Building a Culture of Collaboration, Trust, and Evidence**
A strong schoolwide and classroom culture is both a requirement and a result of student-engaged assessment. First, students need to know that their teachers care about and respect them. In the context of a collaborative and trusting culture, student-engaged assessment practices produce tremendous results for students— their ongoing reflection on evidence of their learning leads to increased achievement and growth. Within a school culture that respects students and teachers and explicitly focuses on their capacity to grow and improve, a different concept of evidence develops. Instead of relying almost entirely on a single source of evidence—a yearly test—to assess students and teachers, evidence is collected, cited, and used everywhere, all day and all year, to promote growth. Teachers and students collect qualitative and quantitative data and analyze those data to understand the trends of their strengths and struggles in order to help them improve.
Strengthening Home-School Connections
Student-engaged assessment engages families in their children’s learning at many levels. When student progress is reported clearly and transparently, and standards are made accessible and understandable, families are reassured. They gain confidence in their relationship with the school. Nothing is more powerful for a family than witnessing their child’s self-confidence and joy in learning as they present and share their work in student-led conferences, celebrations of learning, and passage presentations.

What the Research Says
Our work in student-engaged assessment draws heavily on the work of Rick Stiggins and his colleagues at the Assessment Training Institute, pioneers in the field of assessment (Stiggins, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2006). Their work has brought assessment for learning strategies (formative assessment) to classrooms around the country, helping teachers and students see the power of assessment as a tool to support improvement and further learning, rather than just a way to measure learning at a fixed point in time. You will see many formative assessment strategies throughout our student-engaged assessment book; however, our approach widens the focus from the instructional strategies that are at the center of formative assessment to strategies that improve school culture, elevate leadership roles for students, engage families and communities, and deeply affect curriculum.

Formative assessments are assessments for learning that occur frequently at the outset of and during learning to enable teachers to adapt instruction and foster student improvement, such as entrance or exit tickets, whereas summative assessments are assessments of learning that reflect student progress at a particular point in time, such as formal essays.

There is ample evidence that formative assessment increases student achievement, improves the quality of instruction, and increases motivation. In the most prominent study, Black and William (1998) found that gains in achievement associated with formative assessment nearly doubled their rate of learning. In Advancing Formative Assessment in Every Classroom, Moss and Brookhart (2009) survey a range of research that supports the powerful effect of formative assessment on teacher efficacy. “In a very real way it flips a switch, shining a bright light on individual teaching decisions so that teachers can see clearly (and perhaps for the first time) the difference between the intent and the effect of their actions” (p. 10). A similar transformation occurs in the motivation of students when they are taught that intelligence is malleable and growth comes through effort (Dweck, 2006; Vispoel & Austin, 1995). Thus, formative assessment can be used to build confidence and empower student ownership over learning and growth (Yin, Shavelson, Ayala, Ruiz-Primo, Brandon, & Furtak, 2008).

Student-Engaged Assessment and the Common Core
The Common Core State Standards usher in a unique moment in US education— an opportunity to raise the bar for rigor, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills. The standards themselves, with their precise technical language, are not typically inspirational for students or, for that matter, teachers. However, they represent educational ideas and capacities that can be genuinely inspiring. The standards have the potential to catalyze fundamental improvement in teaching and learning across the country.

The standards will not live up to their potential, however, if teachers do not know how to transform their instruction to meet these new goals. The standards demand a different type of teaching and learning. Essential to the new Common Core classroom is a sophisticated and sharp system of assessment that
continually checks for understanding. And—the standards are explicit about this—a system that involves students in critiquing, reflecting, and revising. The skills embedded in student-engaged assessment—reflection and self-assessment, use of feedback, goal-setting, revision, and presentation—are integral to meeting the rigorous demands of the Common Core State Standards.

The math and literacy standards prioritize students’ ability to work independently, to problem solve, to communicate ideas with evidence, and to critique the ideas of others. They demand a system of assessment that does not put students in the role of being passive recipients of information but rather active agents in monitoring, communicating, and promoting their own growth. The strategies described in this book provide teachers with the ongoing, daily information they need to adjust lessons and provide students with effective support so that they can all meet the demands of the Common Core. Just as important, the strategies and structures help students learn to self-assess, set meaningful goals, and take ownership of the journey toward reaching standards.