



The New Black Box of Assessment

Stuart Kahl, Ph.D.
President & CEO
Measured Progress

From norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests, to basic skills, minimum competency, and mastery tests, there has always been much for educators to learn in order to achieve assessment literacy. But assessment is continually changing. Now there are interim and benchmark tests, early-warning tests, and computer-adaptive tests. Standards-based testing in general has profound implications for test development, psychometric procedures, and the interpretation of assessment results.

Item response theory is now the basis of psychometric techniques for scaling and equating, practices that are far more sophisticated than “three out of four correct equals skill mastery.” And as if new tests and evolving psychometric practices weren’t daunting enough, assessment-literate educators must also grapple with issues associated with alignment, standard setting, and accountability models.

No doubt about it, assessment has immense potential to play significant roles in the improvement of teaching and learning. But we have to get it right. In order for that potential to become reality, assessment consumers must stay abreast of a constantly expanding body of knowledge about testing.

Years ago, it was very gratifying to hear some clients credit my firm with “opening the black box of testing.” At that time, the black box pertained primarily to statewide testing programs. In fact, it was the greater involvement of local educators in test development and standard-setting activities, the scrutiny of psychometric procedures by technical advisory committees, and the release of test questions—all in the context of large-scale,

customized statewide assessments—that truly opened the box. The situation is different with the school and district testing market.

That market is currently flooded with tools that have legitimate uses, but which can be misused as well. For one thing, it seems we’re trying to create “teacher-proof” assessments that take the burden of classroom assessment off the shoulders of the teachers. In fact, teachers are the only ones who can perform the functions that the research literature claims have the greatest positive impact on student achievement. Additionally, we’re seeing efforts to make efficient general achievement measures do things they cannot do, such as generate detailed diagnoses and prescriptions for individual students. The complex elements inside the new black box of assessment determine whether or not such inferences are valid. That’s where the new assessment literacy comes into the picture.

If educators—and their students—are going to get the greatest benefits from different kinds of assessment, they must be literate in today’s rapidly changing assessment environment. It’s up to all of us to help open up the new black box so they can get there.

What do you think?

Let us know at twocents@measuredprogress.org



**The Measured Progress Difference
It’s all about student learning. Period.**