



Beware of Quick-Fix Tests and Prescriptions

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

In the face of increasing pressure to raise student achievement levels, it could be tempting for educators to look for quick fixes from external sources. Quick-fix tests are abundantly available and often provide rapid feedback. By themselves, however, they rarely provide all the information needed to make a difference—that’s the job of further investigation.

As we’ve suggested before, it’s unlikely that external sources can satisfy most formative assessment needs. Remember, formative assessment covers the material currently being taught and identifies errors and misconceptions of individual students before the class moves on to new topics. Formative assessments shouldn’t count toward grades; rather, they should provide insights. Used properly, they provide valuable and immediate diagnostic information, which teachers and students can use to improve learning.

Subtest scores from externally produced interim assessments (e.g., benchmark, early warning, or other general achievement measures), although not formative, might be useful to identify general areas of strength and weakness of individual students and groups—or of instructional programs. Interim assessments can also direct teachers to areas that merit further investigation, either through closer scrutiny of curricula or additional internal diagnostic testing. However, any attempt to use them for more is an inappropriate quick fix. Used alone, they can’t provide adequate diagnosis of student needs or program shortcomings.

Multiple-choice questions are another quick fix. They can make interim assessments very efficient. But for diagnostic purposes, nothing beats seeing actual student work.

“Prescriptions without diagnosis”—prescriptive reports that some programs offer in addition to the regular results for tests and subtests—are another quick fix that may be of limited value. These generic prescriptions are usually tied to ranges of subtest scores, rather than to each student’s actual errors and misconceptions. If teachers wouldn’t “write a prescription” (plan specific remediation) based solely on subtest scores, why should they accept outsiders’ prescriptions based on the same limited information?

There is no question that commercial assessments and reports can inform instructional improvement and enhance student learning to some extent. But when it comes to diagnosing student learning, we need to start with teachers themselves, who already possess a variety of assessment skills. Quick fixes don’t do the trick; teachers need help to hone the assessment skills they already have and guidance in appropriate ways to use external assessment tools. Well-designed professional development is the key.



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