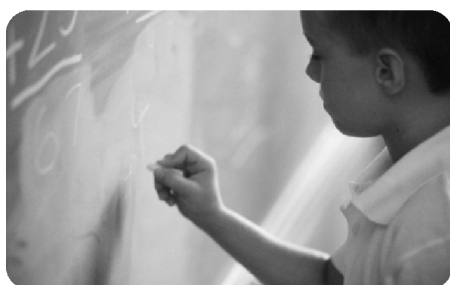


## Is Benchmark Testing the Same as Formative Assessment?

# EdgeNotes™



Best practice in assessment has pointed to the importance of frequent, short-cycle assessments for informing instruction. In response, districts have scrambled to establish benchmark assessments every six to nine weeks (or longer) to monitor progress towards essential standards that are most heavily tested on state tests. While these benchmarks represent important milestones for student performance, the question remains: given that the benchmarks are so far apart, can they truly serve as formative assessments to inform instruction?

With the advent of benchmarks, districts have been diligent in establishing data teams and data inquiry cycles to identify standards or areas that most students have missed. While this data has been used to inform some changes to instruction, the benchmarks are often given at the end of a marking term or major unit of study, making it difficult for teachers to make adjustments or reteach and still maintain the pacing of the core curriculum. As a result, the benchmarks are used to place students in interventions outside the classroom rather than addressing the needs of students within the classroom.

Richard Stiggins made the helpful distinction between assessments of learning versus assessment for learning with the latter referring to true formative assessment. Given the infrequency of the benchmarks, the data teachers use most to inform their daily teaching practice is the data they produce themselves – the assignments, questions, projects, and tests that teachers create versus the benchmark. The problem is that the classroom-based assessments teachers use do not always align with what is assessed on the benchmarks; therefore, teachers see benchmarks as an externally

imposed practice that does not have any relevance to what they do in the classroom.

When benchmarks are administered, they should serve as culminating assessments that synthesize the learning across multiple standards and confirm what has been taught and assessed in the weeks prior. If benchmark results contain surprises in what students have learned, then that is an indication that the benchmarks are not informing instruction, but rather, monitoring standards in isolation of the curriculum.

If assessments are to be formative, then it is important that the disconnect between classroom-based and benchmarks be resolved. The classroom-based assessments and benchmarks both need to be examined to ensure that they address the rigor of the standards and are aligned with the pacing of the curriculum. If done properly, classroom-based assessments can be used to evaluate student understanding and unearth misconceptions at the point at which they occur. If classroom-based assessments build on each other towards the benchmark, then they become a tightly coupled system of data for informing instruction.

By bringing together classroom-based assessments and benchmarks, districts are in a better position to establish an accountability system that is based on multiple measures. This system establishes teachers as an integral part of assessment practice rather than the passive recipients of data. By doing so, teachers can address student gaps quickly and avoid costly interventions later.

EdgeNotes is a free monthly e-mail publication dedicated to providing commentary on making research actionable to improve instruction.

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Edgenuity, Inc.  
465 South Mathilda Avenue, Suite 104  
Sunnyvale, CA 94086

P: 408-720-3312  
F: 408-720-3311  
I: [www.edgenuity.com](http://www.edgenuity.com)