



SDCO CONNECTION

SPECIAL EDITION ON ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION – PART ONE

Engaging Thought Leaders

AN INTERVIEW WITH *Damian Cooper*



SDCO: In regard to sound assessment practices, what kind of progress do you see happening in schools?

by Greg Ingram

Damian: Significant progress is occurring. Gradually, more and more teachers understand criterion referenced assessment as opposed to norm referenced assessment. They are understanding that criterion referenced assessment is about clarity of standards, clarity of targets, clarity of goals, collaboratively developed assessments, and moderated marking to increase the reliability and consistency. Rick Stiggins has said that “kids can hit the target if they can see it clearly and it stays still”. Norm referencing was all about keeping the target a secret.

I am seeing some moderated marking across subject areas. I also see teachers using rubrics and samples of student work for moderated marking sessions. The challenge from a system perspective is how to go from pockets to system-wide practice. Staff developers have an important role in supporting structures that will help enable this at a system-wide level.

SDCO: How do we change beliefs in regard to assessment?

Damian: Teacher learning around assessment is improved when we focus on case studies. Concrete examples get the attention of teachers. In addition, in order to change beliefs related to assessment, I believe we must focus on two goals:

1. That it is good for kids.
2. That it is manageable for teachers.

We need to make improvement goals difficult for teachers to argue with. If we do this, then people will be willing to listen. It is important that teachers feel that you understand how they do their job. Determining what we are trying to do and then looking at teacher behaviour and student behaviour will help us identify what needs to change in order to get the desired outcome. Zeros and late policies are symptoms, not the problem.

To improve schools we first have to identify our purpose; is our purpose to sift and sort kids into winners and losers or is it to help all of them to learn? We need clarity of mission to improve. What are we about? What do we believe? Staff developers could use case studies to engage teachers in thinking about these questions and reflecting on their own beliefs. In the end, schools are about teachers, helping kids realize their potential.

SDCO: What are the obstacles in changing assessment practices?

Damian: Provincial reporting models need to change from norm referenced reporting to criterion referenced reporting. Are we about levels or not? Percentage grades are symbols of norm referencing, levels are symbols of criterion referencing.

Scheduling is also a problem. We also need to provide staff with more opportunities to take part in coaching and mentoring. In addition, we need to provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s teaching practices and collaborate with colleagues. The reality of improvement in schools relies on teachers observing other teachers and talking about effective practice. Team up the stronger teachers with teachers who need to grow. It is also about action research in the classroom. Looking at what works and then examining and refining your own practice.

Damian Cooper is an independent education consultant who specializes in helping schools and school districts improve their instructional and assessment skills.

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