



SDCO CONNECTION

SPECIAL EDITION ON ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION – PART TWO

Engaging Thought Leaders

AN INTERVIEW WITH Thomas Guskey by Debbie Price

SDCO: How can we use formative assessment to support improvements in student learning?

Thomas Guskey: To teach effectively at any level of education, teachers need to gather regular information on how well their students are doing. This information is used to identify any learning problems students might be having and then to guide improvements. The most important aspect of the formative assessment process, however, is this latter purpose: we must ensure formative assessments are followed by high quality corrective activities.

If learning problems are identified but we do nothing about it, then it's all for naught. We must use assessment results as an integral part of the instructional process, first to identify learning problems and second, and more importantly, to direct efforts to correct those problems. Assessments cannot mark the end of learning. Rather, they must become instructional tools that guide teachers in their efforts to help all students learn excellently.

SDCO: Many educators do not believe there should be an academic penalty for late or missing work. Some suggest that this practice is not fair to the other students who meet deadlines. Some argue that not deducting marks for late or missing work does not prepare students for the real world. How do you respond to those positions?

Thomas Guskey: I would agree that part of our role as educators is not only to teach students specific academic content, but also teach them how to act responsibly. A problem arises, however, when we combine evidence on both achievement and responsible behavior in a single mark or grade. Doing so makes the mark impossible to interpret and meaningless. It would be akin to combining measures of height and weight and calling it an indicator of a person's size.

If teachers consider punctuality in turning in assignments an important learning goal, I say "Fine!" But because it is not an indicator of achievement, it should not be included as part of an achievement mark. Instead, it should be reported separately. Have a mark for achievement and a mark for punctuality. In this way, if an excellent paper is turned in late, the teacher can still identify it as an excellent paper, but then in a separate punctuality mark indicate that the student acted in a less-than-



responsible way by not meeting the established deadline for the assignment. This also gives parents and others better and more accurate information about what the student learned and is able to do, along with

information about the student's acceptance of responsibility in meeting deadlines. Plus, because no additional information needs to be gathered, giving two marks is no more work for the teacher.

SDCO: If we believe all students can achieve to high standards given sufficient time and support, how can assessment be used to support student success?

Thomas Guskey: The two elements we describe earlier remain most important. First, we must use classroom assessments in a formative way to let students know what they have learned well and where they need to make improvements. And second, we must offer students specific guidance in correcting their learning errors or difficulties. Often students recognize their problems, but don't know how to correct them. The true power of formative assessments comes not simply from the information they offer, but from the direction they provide for improvement. Formative assessments work well when they let students know: (1) here are your strengths, (2) here are your weaknesses, and (3) here is what you can do to correct those weaknesses so that you learn well and become a truly successful student.

Thomas Guskey is a professor of educational psychology in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. He served as director of research and development for Chicago Public Schools and was the first director of the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, a national research center. Dr. Guskey is the author/editor of numerous books and book chapters, articles, and professional papers on educational measurement, evaluation, assessment, and grading.

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