



CULMINATING VIEWS ON ASSESSMENT:

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A PRACTITIONER'S TAKE

What assessment really is to me

Assessment is simply feedback with purpose. It is the engine that tells us whether our instruction is pushing students forward or leaving them behind. I define assessment as the ongoing process of gathering evidence of learning and using that evidence to improve instruction, not just measure it. Clear objectives always lead the way. I start with the standard, identify the exact skill a student must demonstrate, and then design the assessment task backward from that target. When objectives are specific, the assessment almost writes itself. Research continues to remind us that clarity in learning goals is one of the strongest predictors of achievement, especially for diverse learners (Hattie, 2023; Brookhart, 2018).

Lighting the Mood

Effort grades sound nice, like a participation trophy with better PR. I respect the intent. However, I believe grades must represent demonstrated learning, not compliance or goodwill. Effort does matter. It just shouldn't distort mastery. Instead, effort belongs in feedback, conferencing, goal-setting, and SEL conversations. Mixing it into academic grading muddies the waters and undermines credibility. Scholars consistently warn that grading non-achievement factors creates inconsistency and inequity (Guskey, 2020).

Which assessment format wins?

If assessments were sneakers, each style would serve a different court. Selected-response gets you quick reads on mastery. Open-ended questions show depth. Performance tasks reveal transfer. My personal vote leans toward performance assessments. They put students in real situations where thinking, applying, and creating matter more than guessing. The challenge is time, but the payoff is understanding. Performance assessments remain a strong lever for meaningful learning, especially when tied to priority standards (Wiggins & McTighe, 2020).

Student self-assessment: the secret weapon

Great classrooms don't hide the targets from students. Self-assessment trains learners to recognize quality work, monitor their progress, and take ownership of growth. This matters doubly in ESE and EBD environments where autonomy and metacognition directly support behavior and engagement. I coach students through checklists, exemplars, success criteria, and reflection prompts. Do I support students helping build assessments? Absolutely. When students help define what "good" looks like, they chase mastery instead of approval.

Portfolios: the highlight reel of growth

Student growth portfolios showcase progress over time. They reveal patterns that a single test could never catch. Portfolios work especially well for students who don't always show their best thinking on traditional assessments. The strengths include reflection, authentic pacing, and evidence-rich learning journeys. The shortcomings are obvious: time, organization, and consistency. Still, when done well, portfolios offer richer insight than any one quiz ever could. Research supports their value in deepening student ownership and long-term retention (Benson & Brack, 2021).

A quick glance shows upward movement across the board. Sometimes the simplest visuals carry the punch.

Student	PM1 Score	PM2 Score	PM3 Score
A	42	48	54
B	35	40	47
C	29	33	39
D	50	52	58

Why figures matter in assessment

Data should talk. Visuals give it a microphone. Tables and graphs allow teachers, parents, and even students to instantly see trends and outliers. Below is a simple example of a figure representing fictional FAST ELA growth for an EBD cohort over three checkpoints.

Bonus thoughts: where assessment often goes wrong

Assessment breaks down when it becomes an event instead of a system. Standardized tests provide big-picture accountability, but classroom assessments shape daily instruction. Behavior assessment matters too, especially in settings like STARS where regulation and readiness drive academic momentum. And parent conferences? They should be data-rich conversations where the family sees the story of growth, not just the grade letter. At its best, assessment is less about scoring and more about seeing students clearly.

References

Benson, T., & Brack, C. (2021). Rethinking portfolio assessment for modern classrooms. *Journal of Learning Analytics*, 8(2), 45-62.

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