

WCER Working Paper No. 2008-10

October 2008

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

William H. Clune

University of Wisconsin Law School/
Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin–Madison
whclune@wisc.edu

Paula A. White

Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin–Madison
pawhite1@wisc.edu



Wisconsin Center for Education Research

School of Education • University of Wisconsin–Madison • <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/>

Copyright © 2008 by William H. Clune and Paula A. White
All rights reserved.

Readers may make verbatim copies of this document for noncommercial purposes by any means, provided that the above copyright notice appears on all copies.

WCER working papers are available on the Internet at <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/workingPapers/index.php>. Recommended citation:

Clune, W. H., & White, P. A. (2008). *Policy effectiveness of interim assessments in Providence Public Schools* (WCER Working Paper No. 2008-10). Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Retrieved [e.g., October 15, 2008,] from <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/workingPapers/papers.php>

The research reported in this paper was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation to the University of Wisconsin–Madison (EHR 0227016) for a Mathematics and Science Partnership project called System-wide Change for All Learners and Educators (SCALE), and by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison. Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies, WCER, or cooperating institutions.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

William H. Clune and Paula A. White¹

Many urban districts have adopted interim assessments in recent years as a supplement to annual testing. Possible purposes for such tests include monitoring and assisting student progress, aligning the curriculum, and practicing for state exams, but little is known about how effectively real systems advance these purposes. The Providence Public School District (PPSD) implemented a well-crafted system of quarterly assessments at every grade starting in 2004 and discontinued them in 2007. During the implementation period, we interviewed district officials about what they were trying to accomplish, and we asked teachers and other school personnel about their experiences with the assessments and their use of the results. We found some evidence of effectiveness as well as some limitations. Uncertainty about the magnitude of positive impacts raised questions about the net value of the assessments given their considerable costs to districts, teachers, and students.²

Interim Assessments

In a relatively short time, interim assessments have become prevalent in large urban school districts including Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia. According to Institute for Learning Director Lauren Resnick (personal communication, September 7, 2007):

Interim assessments of some kind have become virtually “standard operating procedure” in large school districts. I think almost every urban—and perhaps also “urbanizing” now—district is trying to use them. What “them” is, however, is a question. They can range from centrally administered and scored short versions of the state accountability tests to commercial tests (usually misnamed “diagnostic”) to (very occasionally in my experience so far) assessments linked to the district’s (or school’s) curriculum. Even districts that are trying to decentralize and give individual schools much more control are sometimes imposing centralized interim assessments (a policy contradiction that can produce a lot of problems).

Interim assessments are standardized tests administered to students on a scale larger than the classroom (commonly district-wide, with aggregation and reporting at various levels) that provide a measurement of student achievement and gaps in student knowledge prior to a final assessment at the end of the school year. Also known as benchmark assessments, interim assessments test a slice of the curriculum that is narrower than the state assessment but broader than a classroom assessment. They are administered more frequently than the state assessment

¹ The authors would like to thank many individuals who made this report possible. In particular, we would like to thank Fran Gallo, Mike Lauro, Jon Mickelson, Andy Porter, and Lauren Resnick, as well as the SCALE Research and Evaluation Team, whose valuable input does not necessarily imply agreement with the analysis and conclusions of the paper.

² Our study of the use of interim assessments in PPSD was one of the district case studies conducted for SCALE, a Math and Science Partnership funded by the National Science Foundation. The study reflected our interest in how interim assessments fit within the broader scheme of instructional guidance and how PPSD advanced the overarching SCALE goal—depth of learning for all students.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

and less frequently than classroom assessments (often three to four times a year). They may serve any of three purposes—instructional (e.g., providing item banks that can be used by teachers for curricular units), evaluative (e.g., indicating achievement to date), or predictive (e.g., predicting scores on the state assessment)—but probably not all three at the same time because of design tradeoffs (Perie, Marion, & Gong, 2007). Given multiple and possibly conflicting goals, a recent review of interim assessments recommended that, before adoption, users develop a theory of action specifying the purposes and outcomes intended for the assessment and evaluating (against a checklist) whether a particular assessment is capable of realizing those aims (Perie et al., 2007).

History and Background of Interim Assessments in Providence

The development of PPSD's quarterly assessments began in 2004. A committee of 120 teachers was organized to work with district administrators on developing interim assessments in English language arts (including separate tests of reading and writing) and mathematics for Grades 2–8. The goal of the committee was to design interim assessments aligned with the state assessment and the district's scope and sequence and grade-level expectations. Norman Webb's rubric was used to evaluate the depth of knowledge required by items (recall, skill/concept, strategic thinking, and extended thinking; Webb, 2002). Test blueprints that included item specifications and the level of cognitive complexity were sent to a professional testing company, the Princeton Review, which was charged with developing the test items. These items were then reviewed by the PPSD teachers and administrators and reassembled into the district's interim assessments. Individuals whom we interviewed in the first round of our in-depth study indicated that approximately 70%–80% of the interim assessment items emphasized conceptual understanding, with the remaining 20%–30% emphasizing basic skills. The 21-question assessment was designed to be short enough to be administered in one 45- to 60-minute class period.

In the 2004–05 school year, the district rolled-out the interim assessments in Grades 2–8 in English language arts and mathematics. Teachers on the committee and teacher coaches reviewed the results to identify gaps. As a result of the committee's work, approximately 2,000 test items were compiled in an item bank maintained by the district assessment office. Each grade-level interim assessment was composed of 21 questions—20 multiple-choice and one open-ended. The items were keyed to the grade-level expectations, with each expectation covered in at least one test item. In mathematics, the open-ended question could be a multi-step problem with three or four parts that required students to give the correct answer and show their work. Results on the multiple-choice items were supplied by the district, while teachers scored the open-ended question on their own students' exams using a rubric.

Within 2 weeks of the assessments, the PPSD teachers were to receive an item analysis for each school, class, and student, as well as a district report. A printout of all students was made available for each class, showing correct and incorrect choices selected for every item. The district also published results from the tests by school on its Web site.

In the 2005–06 school year, the revised interim assessments were again administered in Grades 2–8 in mathematics and English language arts and were introduced at the high school level in Algebra I, Geometry I, and English I and II. Teachers provided input on the previously

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

administered interim assessment items, and items that were viewed as unclear were revised. Except for editing, the test questions remained the same.

In fall 2007, PPSD decided to discontinue the use of interim assessments. District-level administrators provided a variety of explanations for the decision, including a lack of evidence of effectiveness and the summative character of the assessments, but left open the possibility of reinstating the assessments at a later date.

Study Design

Our study focused on the assessments in mathematics. We conducted two rounds of interviews and administered one survey at the district and schools. Interviews at the school level were with focus groups rather than individuals. First-round participants (spring 2006) included 10 district-level and 22 school-level respondents from a sample of 6 schools; second-round participants included 8 district-level and 70 school-level respondents from a sample of 16 schools. The combined sample of schools in both rounds amounted to half the total number of schools in the district. We selected the schools based on nominations from the district, the Institute for Learning (at that time a SCALE partner), and SCALE researchers. Schools were selected to represent a range from low to high acceptance of the interim assessments. To select school-level respondents, we asked principals to identify the teachers and coaches who were the most knowledgeable about the interim assessments in mathematics. In the first round, 10 district-level interviews were conducted, and 6 focus groups were held at the school level, attended by the principal or assistant principal and several teachers, in each of 2 elementary, 2 middle, and 2 high schools. Participation in both the interviews and the focus groups was voluntary.

In fall 2006, we conducted a second round of interviews and focus groups in a larger sample of schools (different from those in the first round), including 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 3 high schools, along with 8 interviews with district personnel (including 6 respondents interviewed in the first round). The second round of focus groups was conducted with a wider sample of schools to provide greater representation of response to the assessments. To get an even sharper sense of the distribution of views, we administered a written survey on key questions to focus group participants. The schools were nominated by district administrators, again to represent a range from low to high acceptance of the interim assessments.

Table 1 identifies the number of participating schools by level in Rounds 1 and 2.

Table 1
Participating Schools by Level in Rounds 1 and 2

School level	Round 1	Round 2	Total sampled	Total in district
Elementary	2	10	12	25
Middle	2	3	5	9
High school	2	3	5	10
Total	6	16	22	44

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Table 2 presents the distribution of interviews, focus groups, and respondents by round of data gathering and grade level. The number of focus group attendees in the first round ranged from 3 to 5, with an average of 4 attendees. The number of focus group attendees in the second round ranged from 2 to 8, with an average of 3 attendees.

Table 2
Distribution of Interviews, Focus Groups, and Participants by Round of Data Gathering and Grade Level

	Round 1 (2005–06)	Round 2 (2006–07)
District level	10 interviews	8 interviews
School level	6 focus groups (22 respondents)	16 focus groups (70 respondents)
Elementary (25 total in district)	2 schools: Focus groups of 3–5 individuals at each of 2 elementary schools, including principal or assistant principal with 2 teachers at one school and 4 at the other	10 schools: Focus groups of 3–8 individuals at each of 10 elementary schools, including principal or assistant principal and 2–7 teachers
Middle (9 total in district)	2 schools: Focus groups of 3–5 individuals at each of 2 middle schools, including principal or assistant principal with 2 teachers at one school and 4 at the other	3 schools: Focus groups of 3–5 individuals at each of 3 middle schools, including principal or assistant principal and 2–4 teachers
High (10 total in district)	2 schools: Focus groups of 3–5 individuals at each of 2 high schools, including principal or assistant principal with 2 teachers at one school and 4 at the other	3 schools: Focus groups of 2–7 individuals at each of 3 high schools, including principal or assistant principal and 1–6 teachers

In both rounds, we used a semistructured interview protocol that sought information about context and history, goals and strategies, implementation, technical quality (for example, alignment, cognitive demand), perceived strengths and weaknesses, and usefulness to teachers. Protocols and forms for the second round of interviews and focus groups were modified in light of findings from the first round. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality; therefore, neither their names nor their titles are identified in the study. With respondents’ permission, the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were coded in NVivo7 and analyzed. For copies of the interview protocols and survey, see Appendix A.

Limitations and Strengths of Study Design

Teacher self-report data have both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it is valuable to know what teachers think; on the other hand, we are unable to verify teachers’ reports that they changed their instructional practice as a result of the information gained from the interim assessments. In the focus groups interviews, some respondents spoke more than others and more than once, so the frequency of points made is not necessarily representative of the views of every person in the focus groups.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Because the focus groups were voluntary and therefore self-selected, the extent to which they represent the views of all teachers is unknown, although in some schools the focus groups included almost all teachers with firsthand experience with the interim assessments in mathematics. The written survey in the second round was completed by members of the focus groups who were teachers or teacher/coaches. It had a 99% response rate, but the sample was not necessarily representative of those who did not attend. A formal survey of all or a random sample of teachers would have given a better sense of the universe of teacher views, but resource limitations did not permit this option.

A focus group design is well suited to surfacing a wide range of views. We believe that the teacher respondents in the focus groups expressed their own opinions and were not directed by the views of the principals, assistant principals, or central office for the following reasons: (a) respondents were guaranteed confidentiality; (b) respondents were selected just prior to the focus groups, allowing little time for coached responses; (c) respondents had little advance notice of the topic and questions; (d) little direct contact was made between the central office and the school site staff regarding the study; (e) respondents were eager to express their views, both negative and positive; and (f) principals or assistant principals were interviewed separately from the teacher participants or participated in only a brief portion of the focus group.

Round 1

Findings from District Interviews: District Goals for Interim Assessments

District officials interviewed in Rounds 1 and 2 articulated three goals for the interim assessments:

1. Completing what the district referred to as a “great alignment” of the PPSD scope and sequence, grade-level expectations (GLEs) (or for high schools, the grade span expectations [GSEs]), curriculum, and assessments;
2. Providing practice and preparation for the new state assessment, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP); and
3. Providing data for teachers on the instructional needs of students, present and future.

Regarding the “great alignment,” central office respondents reported that the interim assessments were designed to foster alignment of the implemented or enacted curriculum (what teachers actually taught) with state and district expectations such as the scope and sequence and GLEs. Once aligned with the GLEs and the scope and sequence, the interim assessments would add the crucial element of defining what students should know and be able to do, completing a set of coherent forces operating on the enacted curriculum. Over time, teachers would bring their instruction more in line with the cumulative force of instructional guidance.

The second objective was to bring PPSD teachers up to speed on what would be tested by the NECAP—which was to be administered for the first time a year after the introduction of the interim assessments—and give students the opportunity to practice taking the test. The NECAP was the result of collaboration by New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont to design a set of

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

assessments for Grades 3–8 to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002).

The third objective was to give teachers (and teacher coaches) better data on students' performance throughout the school year, allowing them to meet the needs of current students, plan the curriculum for later years, shape school improvement strategies, and target their own professional development. The district provided reports linking test results to the GLEs and professional development on interpreting the data.

It was not clear to what extent the district also intended interim assessments to be used by teachers as a diagnostic tool for modifying instruction in real time. As far as we could tell, little thought was given to exactly how teachers would modify their instruction to meet the needs of students. That problem was not the responsibility of the assessment office, which found itself stretched to the limit by the enormous task of creating and operating the new system of assessments. The point is important because the major gains in student achievement attributed to formative or classroom assessment (Black & William, 1998; Stiggins, 2002; Brookhart, 2005) depend on its diagnostic function and use.

Findings from Teacher Interviews

The first round of interviews with teachers in focus groups was designed to gain a broad understanding of teachers' reactions to the interim assessments, their strengths and weaknesses, and the ways in which the results were used. We found that at the elementary and middle school levels, the interim assessments were considered generally well implemented and aligned with instructional guidance and instruction. The active role for elementary and middle school teachers in test development and administration helped fine-tune the alignment and propagate understanding of the interim assessments throughout the district. Teachers reported that the cognitive demand of the interim assessments was high, referring to exercises such as interpreting graphs and the one open-ended question in each assessment. Elementary and middle school teachers thought that the interim assessments could be useful for shaping instruction, help students prepare for the state assessments, and provide useful information for school improvement plans. Professional development was viewed as effective in communicating the nature of the test and methods of interpreting the results.

On the negative side, the most common complaint about the interim assessments was the amount of time that the testing took away from instruction—including the extra days needed for students to make up missed exams—as illustrated in the following two comments:

The interim assessments I struggle with because I know I use it as a teaching tool, but the problem we're having for this quarter is that testing is going to be starting soon and then we also have a Stanford 10 that we're going to be doing, so it's like 3 weeks of testing. I have to test my kids on the stuff when I know I just lost 3 weeks of teaching time.

I think they [the teachers] hate them [the interim assessments]. I think at this point most of us just see it as giving up more class time when we could be getting through more material. I mean, to be honest with you, this year two of my classes I've missed for 14 days because of assessments.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

The interim assessments were not considered uniquely burdensome or inconvenient compared to other tests but drew fire as the most recent tests added to the cumulative burden. Teachers and district staff seemed to have divergent perceptions of the time required for testing. District staff focused on the time it took students to sit down and take the tests—in the range of 10 hours for all tests combined (state test, interim assessments, Stanford 10, NAEP in some schools). Teachers also considered the time required to get organized to administer the test, prepare students, offer makeups for absent students, and score the open-ended question, estimating the “total instructional interference time” to be as much as 3 weeks.

Round 2

Research Questions

Given the history of the assessments, the purposes as expressed by district personnel, and the data gathered from teachers and administrators in the first round, we formulated the following research questions to guide data gathering at the school level in the second round:

1. Did the assessments encourage greater alignment of instruction with district standards and the existing curriculum?
2. Did teachers use the results of the assessments diagnostically, modifying instruction for their current students?
3. Did the assessments provide useful practice for the state test (the NECAP)?

Our objectives were to obtain (a) quantitative data relevant to each of the research questions through the teacher survey and (b) specific examples of assessment-related changes in instructional practices through the interviews.

Findings from Teacher Survey

The written survey administered to teachers participating in focus groups was built around the major research questions outlined in the preceding section. The response rate was 99% (of teachers who participated voluntarily in the focus groups), with 53 of the 54 teacher focus group participants completing the survey. Table 1 on page 5 identifies the number of schools with participating teachers by level in Round 2. Teacher respondents were asked to respond to five questions, based on their own experience and opinions. Table 3 (next page) provides the results.

On the basic question whether teachers modified their instruction based on the interim assessment results, the answer was an unambiguous yes (86%). Modifications made for school and course improvement (Question 5) were more common than modifications made for current students (Question 2) (73% vs. 61%). But the number reporting modifications for current students may have been low because, in written comments on the survey form, 9 of 51 teachers (18%) indicated that they had administered the interim assessments to their students within the previous few weeks and had not yet received the results. Since the survey was administered just after the first interim assessment in the fall, it is possible that some of the teachers who had not

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

yet received results might have later changed instruction for their current students, and 2 of the 9 respondents' written comments indicated that they intended to do so. Teachers strongly favored getting the results back immediately rather than in 2 weeks (78%). We learned in the first round of interviews that the 2-week delay made it more difficult to provide feedback to students because instruction had moved on to another topic. A substantial majority of teachers (68%) thought that the assessments were useful in preparing students for the state assessment.

Table 3
Results of Written Survey Administered to Focus Group Participants in Round 2 of Data Gathering

Question	# (%) answering yes	# (%) answering both yes and no
1. Have you made any modifications to instruction because of the interim assessments?	44/51 ^a (86%)	1/51 (2%)
2. Did the results on this year's assessments help you to modify instruction for this year's (2006–07) students?	28/46 (61%)	1/46 (2%)
3. Do you find the interim assessments useful in preparing students for the state assessment (NECAP)?	30/44 (68%)	2/44 (4%)
4. Would you find the interim assessments more useful in giving feedback to your students if you could get the results immediately rather than waiting for 2 weeks or more?	39/50 (78%)	0/50 (0%)
5. Have you found the interim assessment results useful in planning for school and course improvement?	37/51 (73%)	1/51 (2%)

^aWhile the total number of teachers completing the written survey was 53, not all respondents provided a response to each question.

Findings from District and Teacher Interviews

Results from the Round 2 interviews were coded as findings, many reported below. Responses to each question of the interview protocol that we considered significant are quoted in Appendix B. For each quote, the grade level and role of the respondent is indicated (e.g., elementary school teacher). Below, we paraphrase our findings, referencing the number of the quotation in Appendix B that supports the finding. Thus, the interested reader can examine every quotation cited as supporting any proposition. Some of the quotations are not listed below as supporting any finding; their inclusion in Appendix B will allow the reader to evaluate what was left out. The original tense of the respondents' quotes is retained to preserve the context.

Teachers undertook remedial work with current students based on results of the interim assessments. Teacher respondents reported that they engaged in remedial instructional activities in response to the results of the interim assessments. They reviewed a test-taking skill (Quotation 1.1); identified students who could be pushed harder (1.8); worked with students whose answers to the open-ended questions were weak (5.4); appreciated that an adjustment in timing of the assessments allowed the assessment results to be used as part of quarter grades (6.12); and reviewed problems from the interim assessments with students during the “daily twos” (short exercises instituted in elementary school under an earlier staff development

program, Math Matters)³ (1.3). One respondent categorically disagreed that the assessments led to remedial work with students: we move on, there's not much time to teach-reteach for mastery for the individual student—those days are gone (11.10).

The interim assessments were valued because they allowed teachers to monitor the performance of current students. Teachers indicated that they valued the information about their students provided by the interim assessments and the extra skills required by the assessments: the interim assessments help you to know where everyone in the class is (Quotation 5.2); the reports are helpful in relating test items to standards, which makes it possible to see patterns in a classroom (5.3); the assessments test students on all their skills, not just one area (6.21); and the open-ended questions are valuable because they require explanation by students and give a more complete picture of students' knowledge (5.1).

The interim assessments changed the enacted curriculum (what was covered) and reinforced the other standards (grade-level expectations, scope and sequence). Respondents became aware of lack of alignment in the enacted curriculum as a result of the interim assessments. They paid more attention to a weak area or skill (e.g., fractions) (Quotation 1.2); saw weaknesses in geometry and measurement (1.5). Respondents noted that the interim assessments reinforced the other standards applicable to the curriculum, such as GLEs and the scope and sequence: the interim assessments are mapped to the GLEs (teacher who was involved in selecting items) (2.1); the assessments help focus efforts on what to cover for the quarter (high school teacher who already knew the scope and sequence and the grade span expectations) (8.2); teachers now understand how the test blueprint corresponds to the GLEs (2.9); and the test blueprint now matches the curriculum exactly (high school teacher) (6.13).

The interim assessments helped prepare students for the NECAP (but some respondents disagreed). With exceptions, respondents thought that the interim assessments were good preparation for the new state assessment, the NECAP. Respondents said that the interim assessments: help students understand the NECAP better (Quotation 2.8); are the test most aligned with the NECAP (6.20); get kids ready for the NECAP and help them understand its parts (6.16); are the only available tool for practice with the NECAP (9.3); look more like what we teach (9.4); and better prepare students for the NECAP (9.5). One respondent also recommended that the first-quarter interim assessments be eliminated because the NECAP covers the same material (9.12). Some respondents disagreed that the interim assessments prepared students for the NECAP, saying: I see no connection (9.6); the NECAP is much harder (9.6); and the interim assessments could have a bigger impact if the NECAP were not given in October (9.8).

The interim assessments were not well aligned with the reform curricula used in the district, such as Math Investigations and Connected Mathematics. The use of the interim assessments, according to respondents, resulted in reduced alignment with the reform curricula mandated throughout the district, such as Math Investigations and Connected Mathematics, and increased the need for supplemental materials. Reduced alignment with inquiry-based mathematics can be considered a natural result of the interim assessments' greater emphasis on discrete knowledge tested through multiple-choice questions. Respondents stated: the interim

³ www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/mm/print/htdocs/mmpub/home.htm

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

assessments are poorly aligned with Connected Math (CM), and the problems and projects in CM are too time-consuming (Quotation 1.11); mini-units for CM were never written, so now there are gaps in that curriculum compared to the GLEs (2.11); CM students lack preparation for the interim assessments, and preparing for the interim assessments requires extra work (3.10); a traditional textbook with illustrated examples and many problems would make it easier to review the interim assessments the next day or as part of class (5.9); the interim assessments and CM are a disconnect (7.4); CM requires language skills not tested in the interim assessments (7.5); and CM doesn't prepare kids for the interim assessments (7.6). One respondent felt there was a need to supplement Math Investigations to meet the GLEs.

School-level support, accountability, monitoring, and instructional leadership seemed to be an important factor in using the interim assessments productively. Many respondents indicated that school-level support was critical in using the interim assessments productively, especially at the elementary and middle school levels where structures of learning community, instructional leadership, accountability, and monitoring of performance had been built by prior reforms (see, e.g., White, 2005). Of the use of common planning time to analyze the interim assessments, the respondents said: the results of the interim assessments are examined in school meetings and department meetings, and we know within our building what people are doing (Quotation 11.1); teams at the secondary level are using common planning time (central office staff) (11.2); we discuss the interim assessments at the “plannings,” and we look at percent correct and what lessons can support getting more correct (11.3); all teachers are active in giving feedback on the interim assessments (11.4); we share results and review the work together (11.6); last year there was not enough time, but this year we started a professional development session after school and also used early release common time (14.4); in common planning time, we break down questions—for example, “let’s look at Question 8 where kids didn’t do well” (14.5); we added information on scoring the interim assessments to our professional development this year (8.3); and it would be nice to have in-school meetings to discuss how kids are doing (14.6). Of coaches and coaching, the respondents stated: we use coaches in this school—it’s an open door policy, a teacher can catch a coach on the fly (11.8); without the math coaches, we would never get the same progress, and the principal as instructional leader couldn’t do the same job (13.7); we sit with coaches weekly and look for trends in the whole building, and overwhelmingly we need the expertise of coaches (14.1); the coaches brought to our attention material on the interim assessments that is also on the GLEs (14.2); we got assistance with what to review and how from math coaches (1.3); and the interim assessments keep teachers responsible, accountable, and on pace (6.17).

The value of support and training from central office administrators was recognized. Technical assistance and training from the central office were generally recognized and appreciated: the central office listened to feedback from teachers and made corresponding changes on assessment items (CO staff) (Quotation 3.3); I’m excited about new charts—class-specific, school-specific, district-specific (CO staff) (15.2); the central office has been more responsive and accountable (3.4); the district made a big change in timing to match instruction (3.5); we use the rubric supplied by the central office, and we sit down as a group of teachers and collaborate on what scores the students get (11.9); the district workshop on scoring open-ended questions was helpful (13.1); the district is providing lots of professional development on how to interpret the interim assessments, and I never looked at data this way before I came to Providence (13.2).

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Respondents felt the need for more professional development. Although district and school-level support was recognized as valuable, respondents also indicated that more professional development was needed (e.g., on how to improve instruction): there is not enough professional development on how to use the interim assessments in instruction (Quotation 3.1); once you discover what needs to be done, there is no support to stay on the path (11.14); we need more professional development on interpreting interim assessment data (13.3); the district should offer a test-taking strategy workshop (13.4); many teachers say professional development is not related to their needs (13.6); I would like to see workshops on how to use the interim assessment results to benefit schools and classrooms (14.7); somewhere somehow, teachers need to get together on open-ended scoring (14.8); and middle and high school teachers would benefit from the kind of professional development including coaching that we have in elementary schools (14.1). Regarding professional development, central office respondents made these comments: so many professional development offerings are available—I don't know how many teachers choose the interim assessments (13.8); teachers need more professional development on how to score open-ended questions (8.7); and middle school teachers are getting the most professional development related to the interim assessments (4.6).

Despite generally favorable comments on the viability of the program, many specific complaints persisted. Although criticism of the program declined sharply from Round 1 to Round 2, many complaints remained about the burdens of testing in general and about the interim assessments in particular, especially when we asked about weaknesses and challenges in the program (see Appendix B, Section 13). The most common complaints were that the interim assessments reduced the time available for instruction, were not appropriate for English language learners (ELLs) and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students, encouraged teaching to the test, and contradicted long-standing policies aimed at teaching for depth.

Discussion

Based on two rounds of data collection in PPSD at the district and school levels, it seems that the three main goals set by the district were accomplished at least to some extent. Teachers aligned instruction with the assessments (e.g., filling in gaps in coverage), believed that students were better prepared for the state test, and used the data on student performance to meet the instructional needs of current students.

A large majority of the survey respondents said that they made changes to instruction based on students' performance on the interim assessments. In the focus group interviews, respondents gave examples of remedial work with students and said that they monitored the progress of classes and individual students. Substantial evidence was provided of aligning instruction with the assessments and other standards, such as GLEs. Respondents thought that the interim assessments were good practice for the state assessment (but we are not aware of any data or studies testing the predictive value). Comments indicating an awareness of misalignment of the interim assessments with inquiry-based curricula such as Connected Mathematics and Math Investigations in their own way suggest pressure toward greater alignment. Teachers presumably would be motivated to supplement the longer exercises in these courses with short problems similar to those on the interim assessments.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

School support and leadership seemed essential to best practice. Site-based professional development, such as planning time and assistance from coaches, was frequently brought up in focus group comments, especially those from elementary schools. Prior research in the district showed that these institutions and practices had been built up during earlier waves of reform (White, 2005). For example, “daily twos” and “head problems”—short exercises that were the most commonly mentioned way of reviewing material with current students—resulted from a previous program of professional development.

At the same time, it was unclear whether the interim assessments would function as a system of classroom assessment capable of producing the major gains in student achievement attributed to formative classroom assessment (Black & William, 1998; Stiggins, 2002; Brookhart, 2005). Effective formative classroom assessment normally depends on deep professional development for teachers and schools in the skills of using student work to orient instruction and motivate students. Although some teachers were reviewing points with current students, evidence from our study suggests that the practice was limited. Teachers still expressed problems with integrating results received 2 weeks after assessment; many of the instructional changes consisted of adjusting content coverage for subsequent years rather than working with current students; professional development seemed directed at interpreting data rather than improving instruction; teachers expressed the need for more professional development; and school support seemed highly variable—not part of the design or implementation of the interim assessments project—and subject to erosion from budget cuts (affecting the number of coaches).

If at a future date PPSD were to decide to move further toward a system of formative classroom assessment, it could adopt the changes suggested by Black and William (1998) and others, such as making the results immediately available, allowing teachers to create their own schedules for testing students, providing more professional development on using student work in instruction, and building professional learning community and instructional leadership at the school level. One model is response-to-intervention⁴ (RTI) systems (Foorman, Kalinowski, & Sexton, 2007) that use periodic testing as a means of keeping students on track but put most resources into professional development, school capacity, and implementation of instructional practice. Success for All is probably the most familiar of such models (Borman & Hewes, 2003; Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2003; Weiler, 1998).

Whether PPSD achieved its purposes at an acceptable cost is difficult to say. All of the intended purposes were achieved to some degree—greater alignment of the enacted curriculum, practice for the state assessment, and the generation of data for instructional improvement—and many kinds of instructional improvement were actually under way in schools and classrooms. Nevertheless, ambiguities existed about how much instructional improvement the district hoped for and how much improvement on the state assessment it would consider sufficient. It was also unclear how much instruction and achievement actually improved, a question that cannot be resolved by the qualitative data resulting from our study.

Districts sometimes regard assessments as an inexpensive policy (something like an unfunded mandate), but the costs of interim assessments in PPSD were surely high: monetary and labor costs in the central district, many thousands of hours of work by teachers and students,

⁴ Also called response-to-instruction.

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

extra pressure on teachers to cover the curriculum, lost instructional time, and lack of alignment with inquiry-based courses (requiring supplementation). Testing four times a year in addition to the state assessment is especially costly and not clearly worthwhile when many of the instructional changes occur in future years rather than immediately after the test. Perhaps less frequent testing would work as well; for example, the district might take the relatively modest step of eliminating the first-quarter test if the NECAP covered the same material at roughly the same time.

We agree with others (Perie et al., 2007) that districts considering interim assessments should take a hard look at the policy and spell out a theory of change (Weiss, 1998), asking themselves questions such as the following:

- What change in instruction is expected and through what mechanism (alignment, accountability, or diagnostic teaching practice)?
- What organizational features are required to support each mechanism?
- What effects on student achievement are desired and expected?
- What costs will be incurred from administration and implementation?

Interim assessments are not cheap, and the costs increase if the desired effects on student achievement require significant investments in professional development of teachers. Adopting a policy because it sounds inexpensive, is popular, and might achieve any one of several good purposes is tempting and may explain the rapid growth of interim assessments. But good policy should be more carefully designed and evaluated.

References

- Black, P., & William, D. (1998, October). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, pp. 139–148.
- Borman, G., & Hewes, G. (2003). Long-term effects and cost effectiveness of Success for All. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(2), 243–266.
- Borman, G. D., Hewes, G. M., Overman, L. T., & Brown, S. (2003). Comprehensive school reform and achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(2), 125–230.
- Brookhart, S. M. (2005, April). *Research on formative classroom assessment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Foorman, B. R., Kalinowski, S. J., & Sexton, W. L. (2007). Standards-based educational reform is one important step toward reducing the achievement gap. In A. Gamoran (Ed.), *Standards-based reform and the poverty gap: Lessons from No Child Left Behind* (pp. 17–44). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Osthoff, E., & Cantrell, S. (2004, June). *LAUSD mathematics teacher and coach focus groups: Views of district instructional guidance from the field* (SCALE Technical Report). Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from http://www.scalem.org/files/research/Products/OsthoffCantrell_LAUSDMathTeachersCoachFocusGroups.pdf
- Perie, M., Marion, S., & Gong, B. (2007, February). *A framework for considering interim assessments*. Dover, NH: National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessments. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from http://www.nciea.org/publications/ConsideringInterimAssess_MAP07.pdf
- Stiggins, R. J. (2002, June). Assessment crisis: The absence of assessment FOR learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, pp. 758–765. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0206sti.htm>
- Webb, N. (2002, March). *Depth-of-knowledge levels for four content areas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from <http://facstaff.wcer.wisc.edu/normw/All%20content%20areas%20%20DOK%20levels%2032802.doc>
- Weiler, J. (1998). *Success for All: A summary of evaluations* (ERIC/CUE Digest No. 139). New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services No. ED 425250)

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Weiss, C. (1998). *Evaluation: Methods for studying programs and policies* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

White, P. (2005). *SCALE case study: Providence Public School District*. Madison: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Appendix A

Round 1 District-Level Interview Protocol

1. What has your role been as far in the interim assessments in the district? Since when? How did you get involved?
 - What has the district implemented so far in terms of the interim assessments?
 - What is your role in relation to the math teachers, other central office administrators?
2. How do the interim assessments fit with the district's overall strategic plan?
 - What other policy initiatives are supportive of or place tensions on the implementation and effects of the interim assessments?
 - What do you see as the consistencies or inconsistencies?
 - What do you see as the key issues that face the district in attempting to improve mathematics teaching and learning and how do you see the interim assessments fitting into those efforts?
3. What is the content of the assessments?
 - How much do they emphasize conceptual understanding versus basic skills?
 - How have the assessments been aligned with the state standards, with the curriculum, with the state assessments?
 - How do the assessments fit with Math Investigations, Connected Math, Math Matters, and Disciplinary Literacy?
 - What do you see as the consistencies or inconsistencies?
4. How are the assessments used by teachers and others?
 - Who sees the data, and what is done as a result?
 - Do teachers already know the information, do they find any aspects useful? How do you think the results coach and guide teachers?
 - How do teachers cope with and reconcile the multiple influences operating on instruction—e.g., besides the interim assessments, the curriculum, state testing, professional development?
 - Is there any district-wide use of the results? Does the district use the assessments for management purposes such as instructional development? If yes, how?

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

- Do the schools have different processes for using the results (grade-level meetings, individual teacher bases)? Are they mobilized in different ways?
5. How do teachers and others understand the data available to them from the interim assessments?
 - What modifications do they make, if any, on the basis of this data?
 - Where do teachers acquire the knowledge and capacity to identify promising instructional changes and put them into practice (e.g., distributed instructional leadership in the school, district-sponsored professional development)?
 - How is the district supplying professional development related to the assessments? Who are the providers?
 6. How do you view the implementation and use of the interim assessments overall?
 - How do teachers/principals view the implementation and use of the assessments?
 - Benefits versus obstacles?
 - What about the teachers' union?
 - How has central office responded to complaints/concerns?
 - What could be done to improve implementation/impact? How much of this is being done now? What are the obstacles to doing this?
 7. Any other respondents you would recommend for me to talk to at the district or school level who are particularly knowledgeable about interim assessments in the district?
 8. Anything else important to add?

Round 1 Teacher/Principal Focus Group Protocol

1. How have you used the interim assessments in your school? Since when? How did you get involved?
2. What's been implemented at your school so far in terms of the interim assessments?
3. What do you see as the major strengths and weaknesses of the interim assessments?
4. How do the assessments fit with your school's improvement plan and the district's overall strategic plan? What do you see as the key issues that face the district in attempting to improve math teaching and learning and how do you see the assessments fitting into those efforts?

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

5. What is the content of the interim assessments? How much do they emphasize conceptual understanding versus basic skills? How are they aligned with state standards, with the curriculum, with the state assessments? How do they fit with Math Investigations, Connected Math, Math Matters, and disciplinary literacy?
6. How do you use the interim assessments? Do you see the data results? What do you do as a result? Do you find the information provided by the assessments useful? Do you already know the information? How are you guided by the results?
 - What modifications do you make in instruction or otherwise on the basis of the data from the assessments?
 - Where do you acquire the knowledge about changes to make in response to the assessments (e.g., other teachers, school administrators, district-sponsored professional development)?
 - Does your school have a process for interpreting and using data from the assessments (e.g., grade-level meetings)? Are the assessments built into your process for school improvement?
 - Is the district supplying professional development related to the assessments? Who are the providers?
 - How do you cope with and reconcile the multiple influences operating on instruction—e.g., besides the interim assessments, the curriculum, state testing, professional development?
7. How do you view the implementation and use of the interim assessments overall?
 - Benefits versus obstacles?
 - What about the teachers' union?
 - How has central office responded to complaints/concerns?
 - What could be done to improve implementation/impact?
 - How much of this is being done now? What are the obstacles to doing this?
8. Anything else important to add?

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Round 2 District-Level Interview Protocol

1. Has the district's strategy for implementing and evaluating the interim assessments changed at all? In what way? Why?
2. Now that the interim assessments have been in place for another year, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of the interim assessments as experienced in the district?
3. Have any changes been made in the timing or method of reporting the results to teachers? Have efforts been made to computerize the results and/or get the results out more quickly?
4. Have any changes been made at the high school level, any change in the level of acceptance? Why or why not?
5. Are teachers expected to give feedback to their current students based on the interim assessments? Given the 2-week delay, when in the school year are they expected to give feedback?
6. Do you think that the interim assessments are useful in preparing students for the state tests (the NECAP)? Why or why not?
7. Is the program still viable? Is the district willing to stay with it? Is there union pressure? Was the task force formed? What was the result?
8. Anything else important to add? Any other aspects of the assessments that we're not getting at that you'd like us to?

Round 2 Teacher/Principal Focus Group Protocol

1. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of the interim assessments as experienced in this school?
2. What organized efforts have occurred in this school to implement the interim assessments?
3. When you look at the data on student performance, do you think of ways to improve instruction? If yes, how; and if not, why not?
4. What changes to instruction have you made as a result of the interim assessments?
5. What sources do you find most useful in understanding student performance on interim assessments and deciding what to do about the results (including district professional development, school level meetings, informal discussion with other teachers)?

Round 2 Teacher Focus Group Written Survey

Your responses to items in this survey on based on your individual experience and opinions.

1. Have you made any modifications to instruction because of the interim assessments?

Yes

No

Comments:

2. Did the results on this year's assessment(s) help you to modify instruction for this year's (2006–07) students?

Yes

No

Comments:

3. Do you find the interim assessments useful in preparing students for the state assessment (NECAP)?

Yes

No

Comments:

4. Would you find the interim assessments more useful in giving feedback to your students if you could get the results immediately rather than waiting for 2 weeks or more?

Yes

No

Comments:

5. Have you found the interim assessments results useful in planning for school improvement and course improvement?

Yes

No

Comment

Appendix B

Evaluation of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools: Findings from Interviews and a Survey January 2008

Numbered quotations from Round 2 district and focus group interviews

1. Changes in Instruction

Changes in assigning homework and review.

1.1 Teachers made changes to homework assignments and review, concentrating more on the areas where students showed weaknesses on the interim assessments—e.g., an elementary school teacher helped students to better identify different coins on the interim assessments by teaching with pictures of coins instead of using actual coins. *“There’s a section (on the interim assessment) on coins and the way that the assessment teaches them, we use a lot of manipulatives and the kids are used to identifying the coins with the manipulatives and on the test there are a lot of pictures. So I’m trying to use a lot more pictures of the coins than in the past using just the manipulatives”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).

Increased number of problems.

1.2 Teachers added more strategies and concrete problems in areas where students showed weaknesses. *“Sometimes it’s difficult for the children to understand fractions and although I used, or maybe in the past I thought I was using, a lot of concrete ways to teach fractions. Well, the test results have taught me that I needed to do more concrete, a more concrete approach to fractions, and I have done that. Also, like [for] adding and subtraction: I have learned to teach that using deeper strategies”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Added daily twos and head problems. Teachers added daily twos and head problems related to areas where students showed on the interim assessments that they needed more work, taking 5 minutes at the start of class to review.

1.3 *“Gee, the majority of these kids missed Number 13, let’s go back and see what 13 was and let’s look at what skill or practice or theory or whatever was involved in Number 13 and why did so many kids—not just a classroom, but so many kids across classrooms—miss it? And that’s where we bring in a math coach and we look at, you know, what are our strategies for teaching this, what are we doing to help them to change it?”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 7).

1.4 *“We are looking at the language and the vocabulary in the test so that we can gear our instruction from that point on even though we’re past that part of our curriculum. It comes up in our daily twos and head problems, we always go back to it”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Benefits

Guided instructional strategies.

1.5 The interim assessment results gave teachers a clearer picture of the items that were a problem for the students.

“We look for trends within the grade level and across the school. So for instance we know that our children have problems, I think our geometry and measurement was one of the ones we found, not from the interim assessments, I mean we knew that was going to be a problem. But then you have the hard data to support the fact that yes, geometry and measurement is an issue” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Gave teachers the incentive to become more familiar with the scope and sequence.

1.6 If the interim assessment results were low, the scores served as an embarrassment for teachers and an incentive to follow the workshop model with more fidelity by getting more professional development to implement it in the classroom (according to district representative) by doing head problems and daily twos, and by becoming more familiar with the scope and sequence. *“We discuss going over the tests with the students and asking why they answered a certain way on certain questions, finding distracters that could have led them to the wrong answer”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 9).

Strengths/Successes

Teachers had better control of learning outcomes.

1.7 With more frequent information on how the students were doing, the teachers were able to adjust the material to match learning needs based on how well their students were performing: *“The teachers can no longer blame the students for not learning if consistently the results are not as promising as teachers had hoped”* (High School Principal, High School 1).

Provided teachers with more information on ability level of students. Informed teachers that student had more potential and could be pushed more to perform better on daily assignments.

Helped teachers to see improvement in student achievement over time.

1.8 Teachers saw the students doing more independent thinking: *“A lot less of them [students] [are] expecting us to spoon-feed them the answer”* (High School Teacher, High School 3).

Encouraged different teaching approaches. The interim assessment results led teachers to think about different approaches and students’ depth of knowledge.

Collaboration among teachers and assistance from mathematics coaches kept teachers informed.

1.9 The math coaches helped to keep teachers informed about the interim assessment results and to promote GLE consciousness: *“We collaborated. We looked together at the*

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

results of the test, and then we talked about how we could improve our instruction”
(Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).

Helped to introduce new concepts and review old ones. Teachers used daily twos to introduce new concepts and strengthen areas where the interim assessments showed student weaknesses.

Helped to redirect planning for the following year.

1.10 *“If I feel that there’s a huge gap in something that my whole class is missing, I need to look at what other way I can go back and instruct that particular piece”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 6).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Interim assessment results timing essential. The later the teachers received the results, the less chance they had of reviewing the areas where students were weak.

Less time for teaching. Teachers fell behind in the coverage of material when increased testing encroached on teaching time.

Connected Math textbook was problematic for the teachers.

1.11 The Connected Math textbook did not provide exercises or problems that teachers could use to review material: *“The book is overwhelming. It’s just overwhelming. They want them to collect data, you’re learning how to collect data. You don’t have to stop with six place numbers. You collect a little bit of data. It’s a whole big story about the congressmen and the senators and the population—that’s nice for a project, but that’s not to teach”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Teachers needed professional development to learn how to use multiple strategies.

1.12 *“Even though they [teachers] may have attended [professional development sessions], they still don’t have that openness for multiple use of different strategies . . . they’re not comfortable yet. They’re still very traditional for the most part”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Poor wording on the interim assessment items. It is important to change the wording on some of the interim assessment questions to make it clearer to the students.

1.13 *“Sometimes I’m disappointed because I think the interim assessments are worded so that they’re trying to trick the students up as opposed to really actually trying to figure out whether or not they understand the concepts . . . I feel that both the NECAP and the GLEs and the interims don’t do enough in mathematics to support looking at the way students solve problems and also communicate their ideas”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 6).

1.14 *“Yeah, the wording because it didn’t align with the Investigations--what we were doing”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

1.15 *“There was one question that almost 99% of my kids got wrong, and we looked back on the test and it was a horribly worded question”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

Some students were tested in a language other than their language of instruction.

1.16 *“Some of my students are being tested that’s not even in their language of instruction, so when it comes back and says, “Well they’re weak in this, it’s like, well of course because they weren’t taught in that language that they’re being tested in. So for some of my students, the results aren’t even valid”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Some teachers feared that they were teaching to the test.

1.17 *“As soon as students come in we’re preparing them for a test; NECAP and then interims . . . although they’re skills they need to know . . . but, I think we’re test-driven. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it’s not allowing for teaching”* (Elementary Vice Principal, Elementary School 9)

2. Connection to the GLEs and the GSEs

Strengths/Successes

The GLEs, GSEs, and interim assessments allowed for back-mapping.

2.1 *“I was at the very beginning of the development of the whole process which consisted of back-mapping. There’s a map that they follow, connecting it to the GLEs and then eventually the interim assessment questions came out of that and as a math coach, math and literacy coaches”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

Teachers took greater ownership of their students’ performance.

2.2 *“The teachers do have pride, they do want these students to do well, and so these teachers are taking ownership. When they do it by the quarter, giving these tests, the teachers can no longer blame the students for not learning if consistently the results are not as promising as teachers have hoped. Teachers have to start looking at their own practice and I think that’s what’s happening”* (High School Principal, High School 1).

Many respondents said the scope and sequence matched the GLEs as well as the NECAP and the interim assessments.

2.3 *“If you look at this, you can see—and knowing the questions—you can see exactly where the student is weak. . . . So I have to say it’s a very positive experience and the GSEs are aligned to the NECAP so I’m assuming that when these kids take the NECAP and we’ve had the GSEs and we’ve have the interim assessments for a couple of years, I’m assuming that they won’t do so bad”* (High School Principal, High School 2).

Greater collaboration on the part of teachers.

2.4 *“It also means that a culture in the building has to be built where teachers are really working together and they really sit around and really think about where the student is and where they’re going to bring that student in terms for that GLE and standard and what it takes to get there”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Helped teachers with the pacing, with its strong alignment to the GLEs.

2.5 *“It’s always good to have some kind of standardized type assessment that gives the teachers some feedback—in a timely manner also”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

Instilled greater awareness of the GLEs.

2.6 *“I think the interim assessments actually made teachers really look at those GLEs and say, we really need to look at this for the first quarter, look at this for second quarter. So interim assessments really pushed the level of teaching”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

“Department heads do an analysis by grade level to determine the three or four GLEs that are the areas that need instructional focus, and they point this out to the classroom teachers” (School District Official).

School district Web site offering instructional support.

2.7 *“The district is developing a Web site providing assessment and instructional supporting documents for teachers who need strategies to bolster weak areas”* (School District Official).

Test scores went up.

2.8 *“I think the scores are continuing to go up”* (Elementary School Teacher). *“I know the interims we talked about at common planning the other day, and we talked about the interims and whether or not they help the NECAP and preparation for the NECAP, and they [the teachers] were very confident that the kids seemed to understand the test taking pieces of NECAP better because of the daily twos that we’ve been doing in the classroom and the interim assessments”* (Elementary School Teacher).

Teachers were more comfortable with the interim assessments.

2.9 *“I think they’re [the teachers] more comfortable. They know what it’s going to look like now. . . . They’re finally seeing the test blueprint or educational measurable page, how that is connected to the test. How the questions match up with the GLEs and actually what the GLEs are”* (Middle School Principal).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Concerns that the interim assessments weren’t aligned with the curriculum.

2.10 *“There are skills and concepts that are being tested that are not totally aligned with the GLEs”* (High School Principal).

Gaps in the Connected Math and the fit with the scope and sequence and GLEs.

2.11 *“There were gaps in the teaching, so somebody was supposed to write mini-units. Well, the mini-units never got written. So now you have teachers that have a scope and sequence and a curriculum that don’t align without the mini-units that are supposed to be filled in there to help that”* (Middle School Teacher).

The GSEs were difficult to read.

2.12 *“Grade span expectations, have you seen them? You can’t even read it. It’s a copy or something. I’ve never seen an original type. It looks like something they just slapped together”* (High School Math Teacher).

Too difficult to cover everything in the GSEs and on the interim assessments in class.

Some teachers felt the interim assessment results didn’t provide new information.

2.13 *“I feel like I already know where my class struggles. I don’t need five tests a year to tell me the same information”* (Elementary School Teacher).

Needed to supplement the math program (Math Investigations) to meet the GLEs.
(Elementary School Teacher)

Teachers didn’t feel comfortable with the content knowledge, especially with math.

2.14 *“Math is really a weak point for a lot of teachers”* (Elementary School Teacher).

3. District Strategy Related to the Interim Assessments

District strategy of the workshop model—differentiated instruction conducting mini-lessons with groups of students

Working to provide more related professional development.

3.1 Professional development modeling for teachers on how to deal with students who fall behind in certain areas, *“I don’t think there’s been enough stress from the district level to train teachers on how to use the results from the interim assessments in order to guide instruction and still be able to stay within the curriculum calendar”* (Elementary School Teacher).

Used interim assessment items as models for teachers to create their own test items.

Pushing the technology office to make the interim assessment results be interactive online.

Superintendent made drastic shifts in the appointment and removal of principals at the middle school level.

3.1 *“I’ve been in Providence now for 20 years, and never have I seen a superintendent take such drastic measures in terms of moving middle management for lack of performance”* (Central Office Administrator).

Strengths/Successes

Central office developed a review process for the interim assessments.

3.3 Teachers come in and give their feedback on the interim assessment items. *“I think bringing data to the forefront of planning, developing a process for looking at the interim assessments and using that data—that’s helped”* (Central Office Administrator).

Higher level of accountability for the assessment office.

3.4 *“I think there’s a higher level of accountability now for the assessment office, in terms of the information that was gathered from last year with all the complaints . . . the level of sophistication in the tests this year seems to be much better; they seem to be more responsible, and I think it was because they were held accountable”* (Central Office Official).

3.5 *“They [central office] did make a big change with the interim assessments in trying to comply with the fact of what is being taught in a quarter, and what they’re testing. When they first started, there was no alignment with what the instruction was and what they were giving us on the interim assessments. They’ve gotten better at it, much better at it”* (Elementary School Teacher).

Good customer service.

3.6 The central office has been more responsive to concerns expressed at the school site regarding the interim assessments. *“Every time I call the [assessment] office with a question, I get an answer immediately. So customer service there is very good”* (Elementary School Principal).

3.7 *“I think we’ve gotten much deeper and better at what we want to draw from the assessments. From the district level we’re better prepared and primed to assist the schools in mining the data that they get”* (School District Official).

The interim assessment results provided information to help close the learning gap.

3.8 *“I really think it’s a great tool for alignment of curriculum to the standards for information and another set of eyes in terms of what’s happening in the classroom. . . . It provides us with a great deal of information for closing that learning gap, and I think we’d be most foolish to do away with it”* (School District Official).

The interim assessments showed the community that the school district was serious about school reform.

3.9 *“Well, I think it’s certainly told the community we were serious about change”* (Central Office Administrator).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Weaknesses of the Connected Math materials.

3.10 *“Connected Math is not enough to be successful on the interims. . . . You try to get through the activities, but they lack so many of the fundamental basics. I have to spend a considerable amount of my classroom time just prepping them and doing the head problems, doing numeration problems, and doing word problems and doing vocabulary and review, just so they can read the questions and follow the directions to do the activities. And by the time you do that, with the periods that we have, you don’t have time to cover the depth of the material”* (Middle School Teacher).

Teach, assess, and then reteach and reassess process.

3.11 The reassessment part hasn't been developed yet (School District Official). *"You know, each quarter they're broken down so we know if the kids are on track or not and what they need to work more on to achieve that standard by the end of the year. I think in theory they're a really good idea. The implementation of them, like many other programs, and the rollout of them I think could have been better, and I think how we use the results could be much better as well"* (Elementary School Teacher).

Lack of human resources and time—leads to errors on the interim assessments.

Timing issues.

3.12 Getting the results back to teachers in a timely fashion, it's gotten better, but still not perfect. In addition, too much time is spent on testing. *"If you can't take time for teaching and learning, what are we assessing"* (Elementary School Teacher)?

3.13 *"Children come in, they're not in a good mood—so many of our children are on medication. So many of them come from, you know, they have the inner-city obstacles, and we try to make this an oasis for them as to the best of our ability, but we have to deal with all those social factors—that does impact on the teachers' time for instruction. Those are the realities, you know"* (Elementary School Teacher)?

Held back by poor teachers and administrators.

3.14 *"It's those poor teachers that are driving us crazy—poor teachers, poor administrators, all who settle for less than the best . . ."* (Central Office Administrator).

4. Elementary vs. Middle vs. High School Differences with Interim Assessments

The teachers at the middle and high schools struggled, especially the middle schools (Elementary School Teacher). All but two middle school principals were replaced in the 2006–07 school year due to low student performance levels.

The math coaches trained middle and high school teachers in Math Matters.

All the levels faced the same challenge, to support the staff and to make the tests meaningful.

4.1 *"I can't say that I've heard or ever had a conversation where anyone wanted [to say] let's just get rid of it. I haven't heard that. . . . You need a balance of assessment because you want to know how our kids are all doing"* (Elementary School Principal).

Many respondents did not know whether or not the level of support varied by elementary, middle, or high school level.

4.2 *"We never would, unless we talked to someone"* (Elementary School Teacher).

Strengths/Successes

Even the new principals had familiarity with the interim assessments and were knowledgeable and committed to the process.

4.3 *“What I’ve found is that their [the principal’s] knowledge and commitment to the whole process has significantly . . . So there’s an understanding that these interim assessments do drive instruction. They are a good benchmark for us to assess where students are—where the holes and the gaps are and what needs to be retaught, how it needs to be retaught, and how do you measure whether or not we’re being successful . . .”* (Central Office Administrator).

More support at all levels in the second year.

4.4 *“I haven’t heard any complaints this year. Last year it was sort of like a drag. There were lots of mistakes. Every time they turned around there was something they had to change”* (Central Office Administrator).

High school teachers more involved in the preview of the assessment items.

4.5 *“They’ve [high school teachers] been more involved in that preview that we give, and that’s really turned into a positive thing”* (Central Office Administrator).

Middle school teachers received professional development related to the assessments.

4.6 *“This year they’re [middle school teachers] getting a lot of professional developments so I would expect pretty soon the middle school group will be the strongest in how to deal with assessments and how to use them for instruction. And then the high school will be the last”* (Central Office Administrator).

Weaknesses/Challenges

The teachers at the elementary school level had ongoing assessment built into their curriculum whereas the middle and high school did not.

4.7 *“I think that’s the problem at middle and high—they don’t have that ongoing assessment. They’re not comfortable yet with it being built into their program”* (Elementary School Teacher).

The high school teachers have struggled with the interim assessments.

4.8 *“I know the high school’s having a tough time with them”* (Middle School Teacher).

5. How the Interim Assessments Help to Improve Instruction

Strengths/Successes

Open-ended questions provided an overall picture of students’ understanding.

5.1 *“The open-ended gives you a clearer view of the student’s understanding of the whole picture because they have to explain what’s going on whereas in multiple choice you really don’t know whether they guessed or not”* (Middle School Teacher).

5.2 *“I would recommend the test because it’s a way for the teacher to know where the students are . . . but also for us teachers to find out if what we are doing is reaching everyone in the classroom or at least most of the students . . . sometimes you don’t have this test, but how would you find out”* (Elementary School Teacher)?

5.3 *“The itemized [interim assessment] reports are extremely useful because you can tell each item is based on a particular standard, and you can see a pattern across a particular classroom”* (Elementary School Teacher).

5.4 *“We noticed where they [the students] had their weaknesses in forming responses—open-ended responses—and that’s what we worked on this year in preparing them for the NECAP and the coaches came in and helped us with that as well”* (Elementary School Teacher).

Encouraged teachers to set higher expectations for students.

5.5 The interim assessment provided overall class information on how challenging the material is. *“He’s not my best student in that class and he had the best score. So I thought that was a red flag . . . [they’re] not really performing for me”* (High School Teacher).

Teachers were getting better at analyzing data in order to make decisions.

Weaknesses/Challenges

Some teachers said they didn’t learn anything surprising from the interim assessment results.

5.6 *“I think we pretty much knew what we were going to find”* (Elementary School Teacher).

The interim assessment items incorporated the assumption that the students already knew the basic skills.

5.7 *“The problem with the interim assessments . . . is [that] it presupposes the kids have the skills—for example, you can teach them all about interest rates and they’ll do wonderful, but then they’ll get the answer wrong because they couldn’t divide 12 by 3”* (Middle School Teacher).

Teachers/students got behind and couldn’t catch up.

5.8 *“If we stop and we teach, then they’re not going to be ready for the next set of interims in January, and they’ll be that much more behind for that, and so you’re just never catching up. . . . They [the students] can’t take their books home and read them—there’s no one at home to help them read them, and they just get lost in the problems and don’t bother doing them”* (Middle School Teacher).

Problems with the textbook.

5.9 *“If they had a good textbook with illustrated examples and a series of tons of problems to practice on and then you could review them the next day as part of your class”* (Middle School Teacher).

Difficulties in interpreting the interim assessment results.

5.10 *“I have to be honest with you, I wasn’t sure how to interpret it, so I didn’t realize, because I didn’t realize what this meant”* (High School Teacher).

6. Strengths and Benefits of the Interim Assessments

The interim assessments tested what students learned each semester.

6.1 *“I think it’s a good assessment to see what was learned that quarter, even though you kind of have an idea as the classroom teacher”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

6.2 *“Each quarter they’re broken down, and so we know if the kids are on track or not and what they need to work more on to achieve that standard by the end of the year”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

6.3 *“They [the teachers] get the data back, and we actually sit down at the table and they see a list of 75 things, and they can go right down Problem 1, Problem 2, Problem 3, and see the mistakes. . . . They can see who got it correct. They can actually tie it to their class and get tangible evidence”* (Elementary School Principal, School 4).

6.4 *“I do like it because it [the interim assessments] is an indicator of what they’ve [the students] learned so far, and it gives me a better idea of where they are and what they’ve been able to learn throughout the semester or throughout the quarter. . . . I would say that it tells me and the school what content areas or content strands we do well in. It also tells us what we need to work harder on”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

Instruction improved.

6.5 *“We’ve gotten better at all school levels. We know the instruction better. We know what problems teachers faced last year . . .”* (Central Office Administrator).

It was good practice for students.

6.6 *“They [the students] need the practice of taking a test”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

6.7 *“The more kids are tested, the more familiar, the more they build some confidence”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

The interim assessments provided principals with information to measure how well students were doing.

6.8 *“From a principal’s point of view, it gives me some way to measure whether or not my instinct is correct . . . it either validates or dispels that and gives me an opportunity to have conversations”* (High School Principal, High School 1).

6.9 *“When results do come out, we get grade-level feedback. Plus the district compares schools. That’s very helpful to me. We can say that there are certain schools that look like us. It’s a bit of insight into how you’re doing as a school. . . . I’ll call a principal and ask, what are you guys doing, if they’re outperforming on math, etc.”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 8).

The interim assessments served as a tool to open up discussion between the principal and teachers about students' progress.

6.10 *"The great thing this year is we have early dismissal one day a week where I can gather all teachers together at the same time. . . . So, I already have planned for one of those dismissals dissemination and analysis of data"* (High School Principal, High School 1).

Continual test improvements through teacher preview of the interim assessments.

The interim assessments provided the students with open-ended questions that the textbooks didn't provide.

6.11 *"The one thing that I do look forward to in the interim testing is to provide the students with the open-ended questions that the textbooks don't necessarily include a lot of"* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

The timing of the interim assessments improved.

6.12 *"We wanted to make sure that the tests were given at a time where students would be accountable to them so that they're given prior to the end of a quarter so that they can be counted as part of the quarter grade and that happened this year"* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

The interim assessment test blueprint aligns with the curriculum.

6.13 *"The test blueprint matches up exactly with the curriculum now"* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

Greater acceptance from teachers, including high school teachers.

6.14 *"I haven't heard any grumbling or complaining"* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

6.15 *"There's no grumbling this year"* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

6.16 *"They're very comfortable with the interim assessments . . . at common planning the other day we talked about the interims and whether or not they help the NECAP and preparation for NECAP, and they [the teachers] were very confident that the kids seemed to understand the test taking pieces of the NECAP better because of the daily twos that we've been doing in the classroom . . ."* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 3).

The interim assessments held teachers accountable.

6.17 *"What do I like about the assessments? I guess it holds you accountable for getting the math done and doing what the children need to learn"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

6.18 *"I agree that it keeps not only the teacher responsible, but the students to keep up with their work and knowing if they fall behind, there's going to be, you know, something else besides homework and classroom tests; that this is something that they [the students] need to get used to because tests are going to be all through their education up to high school and beyond"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

6.19 *"I'm the math coach. I've been on all ends of the interim assessments from writing them to reviewing, editing, and then administering and preparing the teachers and*

students for it. I think they're so valuable because we're responsible for these grade-level expectations that this is what we need to teach for the year, but the interim assessments almost force us to pace ourselves. And yes, we're accountable, but we're accountable throughout the year. So it's a good pacing, and then we try our best to align the curriculum with the alignment of the interim assessments" (Elementary school Teacher, Elementary School 2).

The interim assessments were aligned with the state testing (the NECAP).

6.20 *"I think that it's one of the assessments that most closely aligns itself with the state testing we have—the NECAP—in format and type of question"* (Principal, Elementary School 2).

The interim assessments tested students on their skills as a whole.

6.21 *"The thing I like about the interim assessments is that it does kind of test them [the students] on all their skills as a whole. It doesn't just focus on one skill or one big section; each question will go from graphing to multiplication so I like how they [the students] get exposed to all the different skills all at once"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

7. Weaknesses/Challenges

Spending time and money on assessments when resources are limited.

7.1 *"So the money, the time that they use to do an interim assessment when we don't have basic things in the building [is a problem]"* High School Teacher, High School 1).

7.2 *"There are very limited materials in math or in reading. . . . The computers—there are only two computers, and we'd be very happy if they worked"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Implementation problems.

7.3 *"The implementation of them [the interim assessments], like many other programs, and the rollout of them I think could have been better, and I think how we use the results could be much better as well"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Connected Math program unrelated to the interim assessments.

7.4 *"It's that I feel like there's a big disconnect between using the Connected Math program, preparing our students for the interims, and preparing our students for the NECAPs. . . . For instance, the interim assessments that our sixth graders took, the first five questions were intense questions about exponents. That was only touched upon in Connected Math . . . and if you look at the scope and sequence . . . it's a lot of disconnect"* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

7.5 *"The Connected Math is dependent too much on their [the students'] language arts skills instead of prepping them and giving them the skills that they need in mathematics. We're so involved in just getting them to read the paragraph to understand what the question's all about, and what we lack is a good textbook that meets the national standards and has examples, illustrated examples, practice and review problems for the kids to do and take home for homework, to review together in pairs, in groups, to work in teams"* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

7.6 “*Connected Math is not enough to be successful on the interims. It’s not*” (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Errors on the interim assessments.

7.7 “*I think it’s like everything else the district faces, it’s a lack of enough human resources and a lack of enough time because of the lack of enough human resources. I just think the district does not have enough capacity for what it is trying to accomplish*” (High School Principal, High School 1).

Too much testing.

7.8 “*I just felt that Providence has too many assessments and that they [central office] have to think of what it is at each grade level or span of grades . . . that they really feel is going to give them the most pertinent data that they need to know whether a child is progressing in certain areas*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

7.9 “*Our program has a lot of gaps, and then we’re rushing to do the program because the testing’s coming up and then you rush and it’s like rush, rush, rush, rush and you never get to everything you can and then I feel like I already know where my class struggles. I don’t need five tests a year to tell me the same information*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

The interim assessments weren’t administered systematically.

7.10 “*Some teachers help the students with their tests, others give them [the students] calculators when they’re not supposed to*” (High School Teacher, High School 3).

Students didn’t take the interim assessments seriously.

7.11 “*Even the way the tests are perceived [by] the students—I know before the students come to me and say, well this doesn’t mean anything, it’s a bogus test, you know*” (High School Teacher, High School 3).

Teachers feared that the interim assessments were used to evaluate their teaching ability even though district officials said that wasn’t the purpose.

7.12 “*Unfortunately, there are teachers in the district . . . they feel that the test is used to evaluate their ability to teach*” High School Teacher, High School 3).

7.13 “*Because you get the results back, and they [the teachers] feel as though it’s more assessing them—how they’re teaching—as opposed to how their children are performing*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

The interim assessment items were inappropriate for ELL/ESL students.

7.14 “*Most of the open-ended questions are kind of difficult, and some of them are impossible because of the language barriers. ESL students are required to take the same test as the regular kids*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).

Getting results back in a timely fashion.

Teachers were concerned that they were focusing too much on test-taking skills rather than concepts.

7.15 *“Sometimes you wonder, what are we really teaching . . . if we’re teaching test-taking skills as opposed to focusing on concepts”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 6).

8. Scoring of the Interim Assessments

Strengths/Successes

Teachers scored the open-ended questions, providing students with immediate feedback.

8.1 *“The open-ended gives you, in my opinion anyway, gives you a clearer view of the students’ understanding of the whole picture because they [the students] have to explain what’s going on, whereas in multiple choice, you really don’t know whether they guessed or not”* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

Results were useful to determine where to concentrate teaching efforts.

8.2 *“The reason I like it [the interim assessments] is I already know the scope and sequence, I already know the grade span expectations that they’re tied into that I should be covering for the quarter. But because of the time limitations of needing to ramp up our students, it’s nice to have that second opinion of where I should really be concentrating my efforts, where the district feels we need to hold these students most accountable, and I feel I get that from looking through the test and seeing what they’re asking”* (High School Teacher, High School 3).

Professional development on scoring helped.

8.3 *“Well, we did put that into our professional development this year [scoring the open-ended] . . . so that helped a little bit”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

Weaknesses/Challenges

The administration and scoring of the assessment items was inconsistent.

8.4 *“Some teachers help the students with their tests, others give them calculators when they’re not supposed to”* (High School Teacher, High School 3).

8.5 *“We have to score the open-ended parts, and sometimes I think that can be subjective to the teacher. . . . I find that sometimes I’m scoring different than my colleague might be scoring, . . . If someone else was scoring it, I think you’d get some different results”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Time-consuming to score the open-ended.

8.6 *“It takes a lot of time to correct the open-ended, and they [the teachers] don’t have time to do that”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

Teachers needed more professional development on how to score the open-ended.

8.7 *“They [the teachers] weren’t knowledgeable about how to score the open-ended”* (Central Office Administrator).

9. Preparation for the NECAP

Strengths/Successes

Some teachers and administrators believed the content of the interim assessments was well matched to the NECAP.

9.1 *“I think they [the interim assessments] do pretty well match what’s on the NECAP”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

9.2 *“They [the interim assessments] are so aligned with NECAP, absolutely”* (Central Office Administrator).

9.3 *“It [the interim assessments] is the only tool that we have that gives us practice for the NECAP . . . it’s a very valuable tool”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 4).

Some teachers felt that both the NECAP and the interim assessments influenced the way that teachers taught, allowing for greater alignment.

9.4 *“NECAP is starting to look more like how we teach because that’s what we’ve been doing, so that the interim assessments are looking more like the way we teach and so is NECAP, because they’re sort of all the same”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Increased test-taking improved students’ test-taking skills.

9.5 *“Just getting them [the students] exposed to tests just prepares them that much better. . . . It’s something that we should keep and as often as we can, just to get them [the students] over that fear of test-taking”* (High School Teacher, High School 3).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Some teachers felt there was little connection between the interim assessments and the NECAP. *“They truly are two different things”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

9.6 *“I see very little connection. . . . I think that the NECAP was a much harder test”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

The interim assessments didn’t prepare students for the NECAP since the NECAP was given before the interim assessments.

9.7 *“The interim assessments we’ve had [don’t] prep for a NECAP because we give it after the NECAP”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

9.8 *“I wrote on the sheet that if NECAP was given in May or June, I’m sure the interim assessment will have a big part of how the student does on the NECAP. But to have the NECAP in October, you know when the students are home for the whole summer and most of them probably not doing a lot of academic work, you know, so everything they learned the year before is not going to reflect on how they should have done on the NECAP”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

9.9 *“Just having it [the interim assessments] a week after the NECAP was tough”* (Middle School Principal, Middle School 3).

Teachers complained that they couldn't compare the interim assessment and NECAP results to the same group of students.

9.10 *"You can't look at longevity. This year's group, the seventh graders, has nothing to do with last year's group of seventh graders . . ."* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

9.11 *"If you [central office] can't give us a correlation of what those scores mean on all these different tests, then the district has to ask the question, why are we doing this"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2)?

Some teachers suggested that the first interim assessment should be eliminated since it covered the same material tested by the NECAP.

9.12 *"That's why I'm saying eliminate that first interim assessment because you did it in the NECAP"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

10. Union Support of the Interim Assessments

The union called for a subcommittee and assessment investigation to look at the assessment program.

10.1 *"I don't think any of them [the union] even got a look at what we have, which is our assessment policy . . ."* (Central Office Administrator).

Strengths/Successes

Over time, union resistance to the interim assessments decreased.

10.2 *"The union has been pretty quiet . . . I didn't hear any negative complaints this year. That's a change"* (Central Office Administrator).

10.3 *"I think that the union has gotten the message that it's really non-negotiable; the interim assessments are not going to go away"* (Central Office Administrator).

10.4 *"From last year at this time, we've only had half of the grievances, and this is from the Providence teachers' union letting us know how well the process is working"* (Central Office Administrator).

A central office task force addressed many of the union's concerns over the interim assessments.

10.5 *"There are two, if not three, forums . . . They [the union] saw the corrective actions taking place to mediate some of their concerns. So in that regard I think that was a vote of support"* (Central Office Administrator).

10.6 *"I think they saw the corrective actions taking place to mediate some of their concerns"* (Central Office Administrator).

Weaknesses/Challenges

The union presented strong resistance to the interim assessments.

10.7 *"They hate us [central office]. They hated interim assessments; they don't want it, they don't want it, they don't want it. All they know is it takes time from the classroom. They do not understand the rest of it and their own best teachers, I know, are with us. But*

their own best teachers are those who least frequently call the union, and so we're stuck in this mire of . . ." (Central Office Administrator).

11. Organized Efforts in Schools to Implement Interim Assessments

Strengths/Successes

Interim assessment results were examined in school meetings and department meetings.

11.1 *"We know within our building what people are doing"* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

11.2 *"It's a whole building conversation, and at secondary level it's probably teachers—the teams, the way the schools are arranged—but the literacy coach, the instructional coach, the guidance counselor, the department chairs—everybody's part of the common planning time that happens . . . so we have a whole process in place now that includes the interim assessments . . . they form into teams and for the 2 weeks the teams are working together and they're teaching, reteaching, coming back, and looking at the student work to see where their next steps are"* (Central Office Administrator).

11.3 *"At the plannings, we discuss it, we've gone through resources, taken the test back out, looking at—and targeting—the lowest percent correct on certain items and sitting there trying to identify lessons that could support it"* (Elementary School Vice Principal, Elementary School 9).

Teachers are engaged in reviewing interim assessments.

11.4 *"All the teachers are active with giving feedback on the interims"* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 4).

Teachers used common planning time for interim assessments.

11.5 *"We have common planning time every week . . . so we sit here and we try to go through, we don't try, we do go through that unit of study . . . and you know, exchange of ideas"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

11.6 *"I know in the past—we always shared the results. We kind of reviewed the work together at common planning"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

11.7 *"They [the teachers] felt very comfortable with the interim assessments, and I know the items we talked about at common planning the other day and whether or not they help the NECAP and preparation for NECAP, and they were very confident that the kids did seem to understand the test-taking pieces of NECAP better because of the daily twos that we've been doing in the classroom and the interim assessments"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Coaches assisted teachers.

11.8 *"I think in this school especially we use the coaches . . . I think we have a very open relationship with our teachers, and it's very open-door policy if a teacher wants to catch us on the fly and say, 'I'm having a difficult time, or I need some suggestions with this' . . ."* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Some teachers graded the interim assessments themselves to get immediate results.

Teachers collaborated on scoring the open-ended questions.

11.9 *“We have the rubric that comes through from downtown, and we sit down and as a group of teachers we give them a grade . . . So we kind of collaborate on what scores they [the students] get”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 2).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Little time to review areas where students were weak.

11.10 *“We don’t have any way to go but forward because we’re getting ready for the next lesson. As much as we’re analyzing data and all of that, it doesn’t, you’re going to come in tomorrow and do the next lesson. The days are gone where you keep teaching until this kid masters that and then moves on . . . Now, are we trying to reteach and get it in there? Yeah, we’re trying that, but whether we’re successful or not, we move on”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Professional development didn’t match teachers’ needs.

11.11 *“The needs of our students and our teachers may not necessarily be the same needs as the others . . . professional development, while it’s part of the culture now, it’s not always an accepted part of the culture. It’s something that is imposed on teachers, so there’s still that resistance to that”* (High School Principal, High School 1).

Lack of consistency in implementing the interim assessments.

11.12 *“First of all, there are mistakes in them, they’ve been used more than once, their security is not very high, there are different methods that different schools are taking them in different ways, and it’s just not very consistent. There really haven’t been strict guidelines . . . ”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Talk of eliminating the math coaches.

11.13 *“My role as math coach I know is going to be different next year. I mean we’ve heard anywhere from, they’ll never get rid of us, to we’re definitely going to change what our goal in the school is . . . ”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Lack of funding or support.

11.14 *“But once you discover these things and you say okay, now this is our path, [but] there’s no funding or source of support to keep us on the path, and that’s really insulting”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

Teachers lacked the tools to interpret the results.

11.15 *“We can’t just sort of expect that teachers all read it and understand it . . . there’s got to be PD [professional development] that says how do you look at this material”* (Central Office Administrator).

Time constraints in administering makeup exams to students who were absent.

11.16 *“The makeups, that this child was absent for this session so now . . . it drags out, which is why we have not just, this is your testing day or these are your testing 2 days. We’re going to assign a testing week”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 3).

12. Questions on the Interim Assessments

Strengths/Successes

The interim assessments provided students with more test-taking skills. Teachers liked the open-ended questions on the interim assessments.

12.1 *“The open-ended gives you . . . a clearer view of the students’ understanding of the whole picture because they have to explain what’s going on, whereas in multiple choice you really don’t know whether they guessed or not”* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

Not as many errors on the interim assessments the second year.

12.2 *“One of the biggest issues we had last year were errors on the test. It doesn’t seem like this year is as bad”* (Elementary School Teachers, Elementary School 4).

The teachers more involved in giving feedback on the interim assessment items.

12.3 *“Well, the response is more positive. They’ve [the teachers] been more involved in that preview that we [central office] give, and that’s really turned into a positive thing”* (Central Office Administrator).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Interim assessment items were poorly written. *“The questions are poor, poorly written It’s always the question that only a math teacher would really think of. That’s my problem with these things”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

12.4 *“There are mistakes. There were so many mistakes the first year . . . it was a hack job”* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

12.5 *“I know last year there was a story about clouds, and they used a lot of weather terms, and I knew my students didn’t have the vocabulary to understand the story in order to answer the question . . .”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

12.6 *“Shading wasn’t good”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

12.7 *“The pictures were incorrect with the wording”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

12.8 *“We have found mistakes on the interims almost every time we’ve done them, the kids find them. I find that really poor”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

The multiple choice items on the interim assessments weren't aligned with the math instruction (i.e., promoting in-depth reasoning, group work, and the use of calculators).

12.9 *"Kill and drill . . . if you were doing that, you would be in trouble right? They [administrators] didn't want to see a kid sitting silently doing multiple-choice questions, but yet that's how they [administrators] test them"* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

12.10 *"There are skills and concepts [on the interim assessments] that are being tested that are not totally aligned with the GSEs"* (High School Principal, High School 1).

12.11 *"[This] is contradictory to the way we've been teaching over the last 2–5 years where we've really tried to help the children get more in depth, you know, do more reasoning, take time to reflect on the work. There's no such thing"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

Some teachers said they would prefer more open-ended questions on the interim assessments.

12.12 *"I personally would like to see more open-ended questions"* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

Teachers complained that the interim assessment items weren't appropriate for ELL/ESL students.

12.13 *". . . when you're talking LAP [Learning Assistance Program] kids, they're really at a disadvantage because they don't know the language. It's not that they don't know math . . ."* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

12.14 *"Some of the questions are very wordy for an English language learner, and right from the start they're [the students] already behind, and then the whole 90-minute thing is kind of a joke for me because it takes way more than 90 minutes"* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

13. Professional Development Related to the Interim Assessments

Strengths/Successes

The district offered a workshop on how to score the open-ended items.

13.1 *"I think that [the workshop] was helpful in just being able to score them"* (High School Principal, High School 1).

The district offered professional development on interpreting test score data.

13.2 *"The district is certainly providing us with a lot more [professional development]. I certainly never looked at data the way I looked at data before coming to Providence. They [central office] really trained us in how to pick it apart completely"* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 7).

Weaknesses/Challenges

The district didn't offer professional development relevant to interpreting the interim assessment data.

13.3 “. . . *I think there needs to be more professional development surrounding data in general and what teachers do with data*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

13.4 “*The district should offer a mandated test-taking strategy workshop for teachers and coaches. There are so many different test-taking strategies*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 8).

13.5 “*I don't think it's targeted enough right now . . . when we look at the data, we look at just the district data and kind of in general*” (Central Office Administrator).

13.6 “*Many of the teachers come back and say the professional development is not related to their needs . . .*” (High School Principal, High School 1).

The loss of the math coaches would present difficulties in utilizing the interim assessment data.

13.7 “*If we were to lose the math coach, these interim assessments would never reveal the progress that is being made in Providence . . . because there's no way a principal—even as instructional leader—can possibly be the manager, the chief cook and do everything and have the level of content knowledge that a coach would have . . . if anybody wants to take on these interim assessments and they don't have math coaches, I'd say it's going to be a huge struggle*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Teachers didn't take advantage of professional development that was available.

13.8 “*There's a lot of professional development modules that are out there, and many of them . . . that target this. I don't know how teachers actually take advantage of them . . . it's like having a full curriculum at a university, but certain students can slide through and take the ones that are easiest or shortest in time. So I don't know how much we're reaching all the teachers. I think as a district we've recognized that the professional development program that we have was a good first start, but it lacks focus and it's just too scattered*” (Central Office Administrator).

14. Sources Most Useful in Understanding Student Performance on Interim Assessments

Strengths/Successes

Math coaches were instrumental in assisting teachers with interpreting the interim assessment results.

14.1 “*I look for trends across the whole building So there are trends that I observe and that helps me guide our work. So I will sit with the coaches on a weekly basis and we will have a conversation on what's happening in this, in the building It's overwhelming. The teachers, as staff, need the expertise of the coaches. The coaches have deeper training than I have*” (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 4).

14.2 “*The math coach is the one that brought it to our attention that that’s something that’s covered on the interim assessments and it’s part of the GLEs . . .*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 9).

Common Planning Time.

14.3 “*I think the biggest supporting thing is when they actually get that feedback. They get that data back and we actually sit down at the table and they see a list of 75 things and they can go right down Problem 1, Problem 2, Problem 3, and see the mistakes . . . they can see who got it correct. They can actually tie it to their class and get tangible evidence It’s purposeful. It’s meaningful It’s direct feedback*” (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 4).

14.4 “*The only problem is that before this year there was never time to look at the results. Teachers have never had time to come together, where this year we instituted the professional development after school to do that and also the early release common planning time when that can be done. So that’s been a big help*” (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 3).

14.5 “*In common planning time we sit and we look at it, and we actually break down the questions and look to see, our class didn’t do well on Question 8. Let’s go back and look at Question 8 and see what it is . . .*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).

Weaknesses/Challenges

No mechanism to share interim assessment results and information with the staff at other schools.

14.6 “*I think it would be nice to see where students are doing well, what are they doing, just to talk. We know within our building what people are doing, but it would be nice to have inter-school meetings . . .*” (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Lack of professional development related to scoring and interpreting the interim assessment results.

14.7 “*Offer workshops in how to study data or how to use it to benefit the schools and your classroom*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

14.8 “*I would say somewhere somehow, time needs to be built in where those teachers can meet together and be scoring it [the open-ended question on the interim assessments]*” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).

15. Timing and Method of Reporting Results

Strengths/Successes

In the second year, the teachers and students were more supportive and accepting of the interim assessments.

15.1 “*I have to say, credit [goes] to the math teachers who are teaching it this year; they’ve done a very good job of promoting the importance of this [the interim assessments]. I think also, over the years, the students . . . have become accustomed to*

this entire standardized testing type of thing and getting feedback and what it means, so that helps the students embrace it more as well” (High School Principal, High School 1).

The central office was working to improve the timing and type of information provided to teachers on the interim assessment results.

15.2 *“I’m very excited about what was just shared with us yesterday about how the [interim assessment] reports will come back— they’ll be class-specific, school-specific, district-specific information that’s a chart so easy for teachers to read . . . ” (Central Office Administrator).*

15.3 *“I think it’s [interim assessment data] gotten better. I know with this last round of interims, we’re trying to get the results back to the teachers before Thanksgiving break. So they’re looking at like a 2-week turnover. So they’re trying, district-wide, they’re trying to improve the time . . . ” (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).*

15.4 *“It’s immediate. They’re [the teachers] getting it right back within that week, week and a half. If they’re [the teachers] on time, we’re [central office] on time, in terms of turning it around. So big changes in that regard” (Central Office Administrator).*

Weaknesses/Challenges

Timing was still an issue. Some teachers got the results back sooner than others. Overall, teachers said it would be helpful if they could get the results back within 2 weeks. *“I think the teachers would receive it better. I think the students would receive it better” (High School Principal, High School 1).*

15.5 *“The time that you get it back is important” (High School Teacher, High School 1).*

15.6 *“ . . . by the time they [central office] scored them [the interim assessments] and we [teachers] get the results back, it was too late to put them on this quarter’s report card” (High School Teacher, High School 2).*

15.7 *“And I know the last time—last year when I came around—teachers complained a bit about sometimes taking 2 weeks or longer to get the results back . . . I think timing is essential. As soon as we can get the feedback to them, it would be great if it were within 1 or 2 days of the assessments because it’s fresh in their minds . . . they haven’t moved too far away that now they have to try to fit it back in . . . ” (Central Office Administrator).*

15.8 *“It varies, It takes at least 3 weeks to a month to get them [the interim assessment results] back. How is that useful to the classroom teacher? I would like to see the results come back a little more user friendly” (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 8).*

Some teachers suggested reducing the interim assessments to two or three times a year rather than four.

15.9 *“They tried that last year. We didn’t do the interim until January, and the teachers said that it should be quarterly. If we’re going to use the information that it gives us, then it needs to be quarterly. They’re still trying to match it up with their curriculum” (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 3).*

15.10 *“So I mean second and third quarter tests might not mean anything because we just haven’t covered that material at that point in time” (High School Teacher, High School 3).*

Scoring of the open-ended items took time away from other tasks.

15.11 *“The actual test was fine, actually giving it wasn’t bad—the problem is correcting the open-ended while we have to do report cards . . . the whole thing is so caught up with the other testing that other school districts probably wouldn’t have. So it’s trying to separate it”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

16. Is Program Still Viable? Recommendations

Positive Recommendations

Overall, teachers have accepted the interim assessments.

16.1 *“It’s an accepted practice now”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

16.2 *“It is sincere and it is really intended to help the population of students”* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

16.3 *“One of the things that was helpful to me in that workshop that we went to where we scored the interim assessments is they [central office], for the first time, did make it clear that the interim assessment items [were] more or less a teacher tool, just to let us, give us an idea of how well the students understood the material that we had covered . . . ”* (High School Teacher, High School 1).

Some respondents felt the interim assessments served as good test prep for the NECAP.

16.4 *“You know, it’s a way to get kids ready for what they’ll be tested on in the state testing . . . ”* (Central Office Administrator).

Some respondents expressed support of the interim assessments since they believed the use of the assessments led to improved teaching.

16.5 *“ . . . I would recommend the test because it’s a way for the teacher to know where the students are . . . but also for us teachers to find out if what we are doing is reaching everyone in the classroom . . . testing leads to teaching actually, to improved teaching. And that’s what I would say to any district who wants to adopt this”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Interim assessments focused on students, not assessing teachers.

16.6 *“Maybe that’s the advantage of it, that it is low stakes and the reason to keep it”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 4).

Serve to standardize the curriculum.

16.7 *“I think they [the interim assessments] give us good quick feedback. I think it sort of standardizes the curriculum from classroom to classroom”* (Elementary School Principal, Elementary School 7).

Weaknesses/Challenges

Some teacher resistance persisted.

16.8 *“There’s still some resistance and some has to do with the credibility of the testing and making sure that when the interim assessments are put in teachers’ hands that there are no errors and that’s not what we experienced and that kind of puts us in a very awkward situation”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Some students didn’t take the interim assessments seriously.

16.9 *“Sometimes the kids just blow it off, and I think that part of blowing it off is the fact that they’re tested so much”* (High School Teacher, High School 2).

Too much testing.

16.10 *“With all the testing we’re doing every other week, I don’t know how valid it is because they’re [the students] exhausted”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

16.11 *“When you layer the interim assessment on top of all these other demands, then what happens is you water down the usefulness of any single tool”* (Elementary School teacher, Elementary School 4).

16.12 *“I really think that it interferes with our instruction too. Because sometimes these tests are scheduled for 60 minutes, 90-minute blocks, but sometimes the kids take a longer time, and it does interfere during the day”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 4).

16.13 *“We’re always rushing. We weren’t able to prepare our kids for the interim assessment, we have so much going on”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School).

Lack of funding.

Recommendations for Challenges

Create a computerized system that provides instantaneous interim assessment results.

16.14 *“That would be fantastic. I think the teachers would receive it better. I think the students would receive it better”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

Improve communication between central office and the school level. Enhance teacher awareness.

16.15 *“I think first off, up front, teachers need to be made aware that this is what’s going to happen and why”* (Middle School Teacher, Middle School 1).

16.16 *“. . . come down and have us talk openly about what the purpose of the interim assessments are. What’s going to benefit teachers best as far as instruction goes and how it can be used in a way that can be beneficial to the teachers and for the kids and really improving teaching and learning”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 3).

Get the results back in a timely fashion so that the information can be used for grading.

16.17 “. . . I think if we can align things so that we have all the grades prior to grading time and we count them as quarterly exams, I think that’s what we need to do” (High School Teacher, High School 2).

Provide more appropriate professional development.

16.18 *“The math coaches are doing some training for middle and high school teachers in the Math Matters program that we do. So we do the district level, but it’s, you know, 2 hours here and 2 hours there, it’s not that we’re in their buildings. If we could move what we do here to the higher levels, I’m sure that they would get better”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Improve the assessment items. Make sure the interim assessment items use appropriate vocabulary.

16.19 *“I would say to make sure that you incorporate the correct vocabulary and use it consistently throughout the school like we’ve done with the head problems, just so that students if they saw it on the test, they wouldn’t freeze up and say, oh what does that mean”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2)?

Administer the interim assessments uniformly with the other states that use the NECAP.

16.20 *“If we’re preparing for the NECAP, so if it’s in the three states that do NECAP, maybe these interim assessments need to be uniform for the three states so there’s some even playing ground”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Offer the interim assessments in Spanish.

16.21 *“I just want—if it’s going to be a district test and not a state test—and if it’s going to be for my instruction, then I think I should be able to have it in the language of instruction of my students”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 2).

Pilot the test items.

Hire professional test writers.

16.22 *“I think it needs to be developed specific to the district”* (Central Office Administrator).

Involve the parents.

16.23 *“You have to involve the parents”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

Give students the test results.

16.24 *“And not to be afraid to come back at the kids. We never tell the kids about the data—boys and girls, we really did fabulous . . .”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 5).

Policy Effectiveness of Interim Assessments in Providence Public Schools

Add more open-ended items. Some teachers felt that the open-ended items more closely matched the type of instruction they were promoting and thought it would be helpful to include more open-ended items and fewer multiple-choice items.

Reduce the number of times the assessments are administered.

16.25 Administer the interim assessments one, two, or three times a year rather than four. *“A year ago, we did Quarter 1 in January and Quarter 3 and 4 in June. It was much better, we got the same information, but we didn’t feel like we were rushing the material”* (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 7).

Make the interim assessments more user-friendly. Teachers complained about the formatting on the interim assessments, including the font size. They also complained that some of the images were misleading, the numbering was misleading, and transferring the answers from the test booklet to the scan sheet presented difficulties.

Give teachers common planning time to discuss the interim assessment results.

Improve scoring procedures to systematically score the open-ended questions.

Other important areas. Only two items were coded here. One pertained to a double-block math period that was offered at one of the high schools as a way to increase the amount of time that students were exposed to math material (High School Principal, High School 3). The other pertained to the Math Investigations program and one teacher’s view of the program as an improved method to get students to understand number sense and algorithms (Elementary School Teacher, Elementary School 10).