

II. IMPROVING STUDENT EXPERIENCE, GROWTH, AND LEARNING

User's Guide and Toolkit for the Surveys of Student
Engagement: The High School Survey of Student Engagement
(HSSSE) and the Middle Grades Survey of Student
Engagement (MGSSE)

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Schools and universities collect evidence and conduct institutional research for the following reasons, among others:

- Accreditation requirements
- Board expectations
- Parent questions
- Alumni messaging
- Prospective parent marketing

No matter what prompts education leaders, implementing new tools and procedures for educational assessment is most meaningful, rewarding, and effective if its ultimate aims are fulfilling mission, strengthening culture, enhancing wellness, and better educating students.

Measurement makes a difference. Educational settings benefit from the commonplace corporate utterance “What gets measured gets done.” A 2013 RAND report for the Hewlett Foundation, *New Assessments, Better Instruction?* found that assessments had a big impact on teacher activities in the classroom (including changes in curriculum content and emphasis), time allocation and resources for different pedagogical activities, and teachers’ interactions with individual students. This impact is most effective under the following conditions:

- Teachers receive training and support to interpret scores effectively.
- Test scores “matter,” but important consequences do not follow from scores alone.
- High-stakes tests are part of an integrated assessment system that includes formative and summative components.
- Assessment is one component of a broader systemic reform effort.¹

¹ Susannah Faxon-Mills et al., *New Assessments, Better Instruction? Designing Assessment Systems to Promote Instructional Improvement* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013); online at http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR354.html.

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The late Grant Wiggins, educator and author, made the same argument as absolutely central to his counsel to school leaders:

First and foremost, academic leaders need to ensure that every educator understands that his or her job is to work toward the mission and goals by *identifying and working to close the inevitable gaps* between mission and reality, ... between desired learning results and actual performances by students on measures that matter.²

The use of data to inform improvement has received a great deal of attention of late, and many administrators are seeking to strengthen data use in their school. The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) and the newly launched Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE) are excellent starting points or next steps. The HSSSE (targeting grades nine through 12) and the MGSSE (targeting grades five through nine) are student-focused surveys that investigate the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of students about their school work, the school learning environment, and their interactions with the school community. These data sets provide information about student satisfaction, classroom learning environments, attention given to 21st century skills, bullying, student stress, and much, much more.

Student engagement, although worded in a variety of ways, is sometimes explicitly stated or implied by the mission statements of many independent schools. But even when it isn't, there is strong evidence supporting the assertion that engagement leads to greater academic achievement, which is certainly in the mission statement of nearly every school. To cite Murphy and Torre, "Scholars universally demonstrate a 'positive correlation' between engagement and 'achievement related outcomes,'" and "Lack of engagement adversely affects student achievement."³ Sixty-three percent of respondents in an

² Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Schooling by Design: Mission, Action, and Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2007), 177.

³ Joseph F. Murphy and Daniela Torre, *Creating Productive Cultures in Schools: For Students, Teachers, and Parents* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2014).

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NAIS survey reported that the HSSSE was “extremely” or “very” useful for evaluating their school’s educational effectiveness. Another 33 percent said it was “somewhat” useful. As one respondent wrote, “We are really most interested in measuring our students’ perception about how engaged they feel in all aspects of our program, and we are very interested in trying to compare these data with schools that are similar to ours. For the most part, HSSSE has helped us to do this.”⁴

Since the HSSSE has been used by independent schools for a longer time than the MGSSE — 2016 was the first year the MGSSE was available — in the pages that follow, we’ll see more examples of schools putting the HSSSE to valuable effect.

Just because the HSSSE is useful doesn’t mean it is being fully utilized. One representative quote from the NAIS survey was straight to the point: “We could do a better job at this.”⁵ Registering for the HSSSE may be a great step for your school, but selecting the right tools for the job doesn’t mean it’s getting done. For example, handing someone a tennis racket doesn’t make him or her a tennis pro. Using evidence collected by a carefully selected repertoire of available assessments for improving student learning requires a serious institutional commitment and a wide systematic array of initiatives.

Independent schools function in many ways more like colleges than state-accountable, district-supervised public schools. There is much to learn from the work of postsecondary institutions. Colleges and universities have been wrestling with new accreditation and accountability demands and obligations placed on them to collect and use evidence of student learning. They have found the work very challenging.

⁴ National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), “Feedback on Your HSSSE Participation Survey,” September 2015 (survey for internal use).

⁵ Ibid.

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The authors of a chapter in a recent book on the subject summarize the state of the postsecondary practice, and it will sound very familiar to many in the K-12 world: “The norm for many institutions is to gather data, circulate the resulting reports among a small group of people, and then to just shelve them if nothing horrible jumps out. And sometimes even if it does! Gathering data is far less risky and complicated than acting on the evidence in the data.”⁶

What’s required is to turn data into action. “*The value of assessment can ONLY be measured by the contribution it makes to student success and the impact it has on improved student performance [emphasis added].*”⁷

⁶ Jillian Kinzie, Pat Hutchings, and Natasha Jankowski, “Fostering Greater Use of Assessment Results: Principles for Effective Practice,” in *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*, ed. George D. Kuh et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 58.

⁷ George D. Kuh et al., “Making Assessment Matter,” in *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*, ed. George D. Kuh et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 230.