Executive summary

Introduction

Governments and education policy makers are increasingly focused on the evaluation and assessment of students, teachers, school leaders, schools and education systems. These are used as tools for understanding better how well students are learning, for providing information to parents and society at large about educational performance and for improving school, school leadership and teaching practices.

Results from assessment and evaluation are becoming critical to establishing how well school systems are performing and for providing feedback, all with the goal of helping students to do better.

This report compares the experience of 28 OECD countries, analyses the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, and offers policy advice on using evaluation and assessment to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of education. It draws on a major study, the OECD Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes.

Common themes

Several factors are driving the increased use of evaluation and assessment, including:

- An increased demand for effectiveness, equity and quality in education to meet economic and social challenges.
- A trend in education towards greater school autonomy, which is fuelling a need to monitor how schools are doing.
- Improvements in information technology, which allow for the development of both large-scale and individualised student assessment and facilitate the sharing and management of data.
- Greater reliance on evaluation results for evidence-based decision making.

The current state and use of evaluation and assessment varies greatly between OECD countries, but there are common themes:

Evaluation is expanding and becoming more diverse

Most OECD countries now see evaluation and assessment as playing a central strategic role, and are expanding their use. They are also taking a more comprehensive approach: Formerly, evaluation and assessment focused mainly on student assessment, but the focus is now broader and includes greater use of external school evaluation, appraisal of teachers and school leaders, and expanded use of performance data.

Indicators are rising in importance

Education systems are placing a stronger focus on measuring student outcomes, allowing comparisons of performance between schools and regions and over time. Most countries now have national databases on education, and issue education statistics and indicators. International benchmarking is also increasingly common and is informing national education debates.

Results are being put to varied uses

Results are being used to identify where schools are performing well and where they may need to improve. They are also being used to hold policy makers, school leaders and teachers accountable. For example, many countries now publish national tables of school results for use by, among others, parents, government officials and the media.

Rising reliance on educational standards

Many countries now set educational standards for what students should know and what they should be able to do at different stages of the learning process. This has encouraged monitoring to determine if students are meeting these standards.

Challenges and directions

Countries have different traditions in evaluation and assessment and take different approaches. Nevertheless, there are some clear policy priorities:

Take a holistic approach

To achieve its full potential, the various components of assessment and evaluation should form a coherent whole. This can generate synergies between components, avoid duplication and prevent inconsistency of objectives.

Align evaluation and assessment with educational goals

Evaluation and assessment should serve and advance educational goals and student learning objectives. This involves aspects such as the alignment with the principles embedded in educational goals, designing fit-for-purpose evaluations and assessments, and ensuring a clear understanding of educational goals by school agents.

Focus on improving classroom practices

The point of evaluation and assessment is to improve classroom practice and student learning. With this in mind, all types of evaluation and assessment should have educational value and should have practical benefits for those who participate in them, especially students and teachers.

Avoid distortions

Because of their role in providing accountability, evaluation and assessment systems can distort how and what students are taught. For example, if teachers are judged largely on results from standardised student tests, they may "teach to the test", focusing solely on skills that are tested and giving less attention to students' wider developmental and

educational needs. It is important to minimise these unwanted side-effects by, for example, using a broader range of approaches to evaluate the performance of schools and teachers.

Put students at the centre

Because the fundamental purpose of evaluation and assessment is to improve student learning, students should be placed at the centre. They should be fully engaged with their learning and empowered to assess their own progress (which is also a key skill for lifelong learning). It is important, too, to monitor broader learning outcomes, including the development of critical thinking, social competencies, engagement with learning and overall well-being. These are not amenable to easy measurement, which is also true of the wide range of factors that shape student learning outcomes. Thus, performance measures should be broad, not narrow, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data as well as high-quality analysis.

Build capacity at all levels

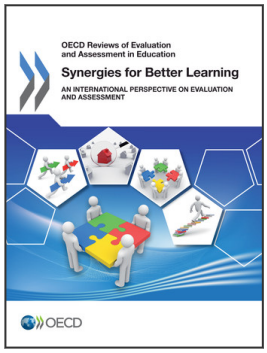
Creating an effective evaluation and assessment framework requires capacity development at all levels of the education system. For example, teachers may need training in the use of formative assessment, school officials may need to upgrade their skills in managing data, and principals – who often focus mainly on administrative tasks – may need to reinforce their pedagogical leadership skills. In addition, a centralised effort may be needed to develop a knowledge base, tools and guidelines to assist evaluation and assessment activities.

Manage local needs

Evaluation and assessment frameworks need to find the right balance between consistently implementing central education goals and adapting to the particular needs of regions, districts and schools. This can involve setting down national parameters, but allowing flexible approaches within these to meet local needs.

Design successfully, build consensus

To be designed successfully, evaluation and assessment frameworks should draw on informed policy diagnosis and best practice, which may require the use of pilots and experimentation. To be implemented successfully, a substantial effort should be made to build consensus among all stakeholders, who are more likely to accept change if they understand its rationale and potential usefulness.



From:

Synergies for Better Learning

An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment

Access the complete publication at:

https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2013), "Executive summary", in *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-2-en

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