



# ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

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**A View from the School**

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Creating a school culture  
of learning and assessment

**Lynn F. Stuart**



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of learning and assessment

## Lynn F. Stuart

Lynn F. Stuart is Principal of the Cambridgeport School, a K-8 public school in Cambridge, MA. She serves on the board of *Teachers*<sup>21</sup> and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

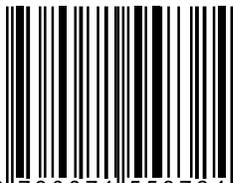
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“*Assessment in Practice* will serve as a powerful catalyst for conversation and reform among educators and policy makers. It is a convincing case for the school-based system of assessment. It provides a comprehensive and thoughtful, yet accessible, approach to carrying out student assessment.”

– **James P. Comer, M.D., M.P.H.**, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry,  
Child Study Center, Yale University School of Medicine

“Lynn Stuart has put it all together for us, as we scramble to make sense of the mad world of accountability. She has plowed through the vast literature on the subject to find the stuff that really belongs in our schools – the child and teacher and family friendly materials. She has pulled the essentials that help us to deal with assessment in ways that support rather than detract from learning. This book is a must for every school's reference shelf on evaluation and assessment.”

– **Deborah Meier, Founder, Central Park East School, New York City**  
Co-Principal, Mission Hill School, Boston, MA

“This book is an incredibly valuable resource for every classroom teacher! It brings together curriculum, instruction, and assessment in a holistic way that makes real sense. *Assessment in Practice* has given me new perspectives on the day-to-day and the longer term assessments that take place in my classroom and is chock filled with concrete ideas and strategies that I look forward to using with my students.”

– **Alma Wright, Teacher, Trotter School, Boston, MA**

“*Assessment in Practice* is an important contribution to our professional literature that belongs on everyone's desk. Its power lies in the systemic approach to assessment that is vividly captured throughout the book and the framework it presents for creating the conditions for continuous improvement in schools. Educators, policy makers, and community members will find a compelling rationale for making learning public – and publicly understood and valued. Stuart reminds us that assessment, at its heart, is about documenting and celebrating progress and achievement.”

– **Mary Forte Hayes, Executive Director,**  
Massachusetts Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“Lynn Stuart is exactly the kind of leader we need for our schools. She has proven that she knows how to make school a good place for students to learn and for teachers to do their best work. When Lynn talks about finding the balance in teaching, learning, and assessment, she speaks from successful experience. I've heard her passionate and common sense voice for students and teachers in meetings of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future; I'm glad to find it now on the pages of this powerful book.”

– **James B. Hunt, Jr., Former Governor of North Carolina**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Educational assessment is on the tip of everyone's tongue. It is hard to imagine an educational theme that has ignited more fervor than the twin topics of assessment and accountability. There is great urgency to teach more and to higher standards, while leaving no one behind.

In this book, assessment is considered with a broad lens that appropriately places it at the center of school improvement. Teachers and administrators are invited to examine how they can develop a school-wide systemic approach to assessment that transforms the culture of their school into a professional community that is focused on understanding and promoting student and adult learning. We explore how assessment, when it is an integral component of classroom practice, becomes a powerful force for improving both learning and teaching. We examine the essential role of diverse data sources in helping us come to agreement on reliable assessment practices and effective accountability policies that support high levels of student achievement and effective schools.

Assessment as it is practiced in many schools has been like an unfinished puzzle with pieces scattered about or missing all together. This book provides a template for putting the puzzle pieces together in ways that strengthen learning and strengthen schools. It offers frameworks and strategies that are characterized by high standards for all learners, recognition of individual student needs, and the momentum of continual progress. It is written as a guide and resource for practitioners – teachers, principals, and district administrators – whose daily work is to engage students in learning. It is also written for those who prepare teachers and those who create district, state, and national policies, for they set the backdrop for the work that teachers do every day.

My career in education has deepened my understanding of the complex puzzle of assessment. In this work, I have been fortunate to have many partners. In the 1980s, a collaboration between the Cambridge Public Schools and Lesley College initiated the Cambridge-Lesley Literacy Project, which provided a foundation for inquiry into literacy learning and assessment that continues today. The fundamental ideas of developmental learning and authentic assessment grew strong in both institutions through that partnership.

For the last 10 years, I have been the principal of the Cambridgeport School, in Cambridge, MA, where teachers, administrators, and students have engaged in wide-ranging explorations of assessment in practice. Each year we expand and refine our assessment practices with the goal of learning more about developing rigorous, meaningful ways to make learning visible to students, families, teachers, administrators, and the wider community. As a school, we have developed a “portfolio culture” that enables students to collect and preserve a record of their learning from kindergarten through grade 8. In the mid-1990’s and again from 2000 – 2002, our school was fortunate to partner with Project Zero, a research project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This collaboration helped us to use student portfolios to extend our understanding of student work and strengthen our observation and documentation strategies. It expanded our understanding of group learning and raised important questions regarding the documentation of the learning process.

### Themes in this Book

This book seeks to provide an informative journey into the complex landscape of assessment. Several themes that can guide us toward more systematic practice are woven through its pages:

- Appreciating the interrelatedness of learning, teaching, and assessment
- Understanding that classroom-based assessment holds the key to telling the story of learning
- Organizing a system of assessment that is both manageable and meaningful
- Engaging students, teachers, and the school community in meaningful approaches to establishing standards for learning

- Developing vibrant school communities that are built on a culture of ongoing learning for adults and children through the practice of balanced approaches to assessment
- Incorporating the principles of sound classroom assessment practice into school and district-wide practice and policy

Throughout the book I have included vignettes and concrete examples of how a systemic approach to school-wide assessment can be developed and implemented.

Part One sets the stage for understanding assessment by providing examinations of learning, teaching, and the establishment of standards.

Part Two provides in-depth discussions of assessment approaches with a strong focus on observation as an invaluable tool in assessment. It also contains practical information and strategies for developing classroom-based assessment programs.

Part Three moves from individual assessment practices in the classroom to school-wide and district-based practices. This section also examines standardized and state testing programs and their interactions with classroom teaching. The book concludes with the story of the Cambridgeport School as an example of how one school has worked to develop a systematic and comprehensive assessment program focused on understanding and celebrating learning.

Our schools need teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and policy makers who will actively search for assessment practices that inform both student and teacher learning. Teachers and principals who are linked in a professional community have the power to build a system of assessment that is characterized by learning for all – a system that is responsive to its community, based on individual needs, committed to high standards, and vigilant about maintaining the momentum of progress. I encourage readers to join the exciting and rewarding exploration of assessment in practice.

## The Carrying Case

What should the “case” or container that holds the portfolio look like? Figure 6.4 describes several effective approaches.

Figure 6.4 – Ways of Organizing and Containing Student Work

	<b>Selections made by...</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Primary Use</b>	<b>Secondary Use</b>
<b>Working Portfolio</b>	Student as work is completed	A hanging file folder with each student's name  Kept in file boxes or file cabinets  Stored on individual computer disks or disk files for each student  Organized by student, grade level, content area, or other designations	To provide a safe place for the retention of student work.  To provide easy access for reviewing student work	May be used for professional development discussions
<b>Traveling Portfolio</b>	Student with input from teachers	Portable file folders or envelopes for each student  Organized by content area, semester, projects, etc.	To share work with families and others	Work may be entered into the Anthology Portfolio
<b>Presentation Portfolio</b>	Student with input from teachers	Bound durable booklets or notebooks, CDs  Organized by grade level, content area, projects, etc.	To provide a celebration of student work; to evaluate student work; as a benchmark for gauging student progress	May become the anthology portfolio that is archived in the school

Figure 8.10 – A Framework for Assessment of Student Learning

