



# PROJECT BRIEF

## Instructionally Embedded Assessments

AUTHOR(S): Russell Swinburne Romine, Laura Santamaria

### KEY POINTS

Instructionally embedded assessments are used regularly throughout the year so that testing informs teaching and benefits student learning.

To be effective, these assessments must be

- » short,
- » clear, and
- » actionable.

In alternate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities, instructionally embedded assessments allow teachers and students

- » more flexibility to meet Individual Education Plans (IEPs),
- » more opportunities to develop learning strategies, and
- » less stress around demonstrating knowledge.

The greatest benefits from instructionally embedded assessments are **flexibility** and **immediate feedback** for both teacher and student.

In the Dynamic Learning Maps<sup>®</sup> Alternate Assessment (DLM<sup>®</sup>), instructionally embedded assessments are one option to assist teachers in making instructional decisions for their students.

*As teachers and students strive to improve, instructionally embedded assessments can be key tools in defining the path forward. This assessment type allows students with significant cognitive disabilities to demonstrate knowledge so that teachers will know whether or not they can continue with instruction in a certain topic. Instructionally embedded assessments based on cognitive models supported by research are important for teacher, parent, and student understanding of how instruction is proceeding.*

### OVERVIEW

Instructionally embedded assessments help teachers to understand students' progress by integrating ongoing data collection with classroom instruction. To move away from the "teaching to the test" mentality, instructionally embedded assessments are designed to be short, relevant, engaging, and to provide useful information about what students know and can do relative to grade-level standards. Unlike traditional summative assessments, instructionally embedded assessments can be delivered frequently as a part of regular instructional routines and can collect data that can be used for accountability purposes over time. In this way, instructionally embedded assessments are similar to interim assessments, though they are not designed to predict a specific outcome on a later summative test. Teachers' use of instructionally embedded assessments ensures that they are regularly supported in their specific decision making about each individual student's learning.

Teachers can provide targeted, individualized assistance to students to help them achieve educational goals.

### CHALLENGES

Large-scale assessments are often viewed as incapable of addressing individual student needs, especially for those with significant cognitive disabilities. Many consider these assessments inflexible due to the attempt to canvass a large overall population and cover a significant breadth of content in a short amount of time. Similarly, instructionally embedded assessments, when done on a large scale, may be challenging to implement due to pushback from educators and parents. Many may

## RELEVANCY

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For students with significant cognitive disabilities (SCD), instructionally embedded assessments can provide timely measures of what they know and can do on a flexible schedule matched to their individual learning. Students with SCD often have challenges related to working and short-term memory, as well as meta-cognition (Kleinert, Browder, and Towles-Reeves, 2009). The unique benefit of these assessments for this population is the ability to provide individualized feedback to address each student's needs. Special education teachers can apply findings from the assessments to classroom activities immediately, pinpointing where a student may have misunderstood a topic and reducing instructional time spent on topics the student already understands. In this way, instructionally embedded assessments are similar to what has been described as assessment for learning (Heritage, 2007).

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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- » Heritage, M. (2007). Formative assessment: What do teachers need to know and do? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89, 140-145.
- » Stiggins, R. J. (2006). *Balanced assessment systems: Redefining excellence in assessment*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- » Perie, M., Marion, S., Gong, B., & Wurtzel, J. (2007). *The role of interim assessments in a comprehensive assessment system: A policy brief*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute
- » Kleinert, H. L., Browder, D. M., & Towles-Reeves, E. A. (2009). Models of cognition for students with significant cognitive disabilities: Implications for assessment. *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 301-326.
- » Rose, D., & Meyer, A. (2000). Universal design for individual differences. *Educational Leadership*, 58(3), 39-43.

view any large-scale assessments as a waste of valuable classroom time, arguing that the time would be better spent on more traditional teaching for the population, such as life and work skills instruction. According to research (Rose and Meyer, 2000), however, students who take alternate assessments are capable of learning academic content when material is presented accessibly, and instructionally embedded assessments can help teachers to better differentiate instruction for individual students.

## BENEFITS

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Instructionally embedded assessments are more flexible than other types of large-scale assessments, such as traditional multiple-choice end-of-year exams. Teachers can adjust their teaching based on the outcome of the smaller instructionally embedded assessments before students have persisted with misconceptions about the academic concept. These types of assessments pinpoint students' lack of understanding, promoting individualized learning that benefits both the general population and students with SCD.

Instructionally embedded assessments give timely feedback, allowing for fast, readily actionable interventions and avoiding long-term misconceptions. Teachers receive an authentic snapshot of a student's progress, leading to a comprehensive view of a student's achievements throughout the year. Instructionally embedded assessments are tools that teachers can use in order to provide targeted, individualized assistance to all students to help them achieve rigorous, relevant educational goals.

## DLM ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

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In the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM) Alternate Assessment System, one of the assessment options is a set of instructionally embedded "testlets." A testlet is a small group of assessment items, sharing an engagement activity and a common context, delivered as a single unit. Many mathematics testlets can be administered in less than 5 minutes. Most ELA testlets take 5-10 minutes to administer. Students complete instructionally embedded testlets in a specially designed, accessible, computer-based environment that allows instructors to choose content included on the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the assessment blueprint at an appropriate level of complexity. The system-recommended complexity level is determined by teacher responses to the First Contact survey, which is an inventory of learner characteristics in a variety of areas, including communication and academic skills. Three sections of the First Contact survey are used to provide an optimal recommended match between student and testlet during the initial DLM testing experience: Expressive Communication, Reading Skills, and Math Skills. As students use the instructionally embedded assessments, teachers can use information to make instructional decisions based on student performance over time. Unlike many traditional alternate assessments based on alternate academic achievement standards, this method both meets the need for summative data on learning outcomes and provides the flexibility needed for teachers to help students learn and grow at their own pace.