

# Preface

“It is better to know than not to know.” This adage, as is the case with all such adages, conveys a commonly recognized reality. Although we can understand why, in rare instances, someone might prefer to remain unaware of certain kinds of knowledge, it is almost always better to be knowledgeable than to be unknowledgeable—even when the knowledge involved might be unpleasant.

For today’s school leaders to be unknowledgeable about educational assessment is more than professionally imprudent: It is professionally suicidal. Students’ test scores have become the yardsticks by which the people who operate our schools are judged. Thus, school leaders who know naught about assessment are heading into battle without important protective armor. School leaders who know naught about assessment are nutty.

And this is precisely the reason I wrote this book. I wanted to support those who run our schools by helping them understand what they truly *need to know* about educational assessment. Frankly, I don’t think there are any books currently available that accomplish such a mission very well. Most of the assessment books written for educators enshroud their messages in off-putting quantitative complexities. Moreover, many of those books deal with nice-to-know, not need-to-know, content. In contrast, I’ve tried in this book to avoid the use of quantitatively rooted explanations, and I’ve been ruthless in deciding what it is that school leaders genuinely *must* know about educational assessment.

First off, let me tell you precisely for whom I wrote the book. After all, you may be holding the wrong book here. Once I've identified the intended audience for the book, I'll set forth more specifically what the book's mission is. Then you can decide if this is the right book for you.

## WHO IS A SCHOOL LEADER?

As this book's title indicates, it was written for school leaders. But who are these school leaders? To me, a school leader is any educator whose routine responsibilities call for improving a school's instructional success. Among those individuals would surely be a school's principal and, if a school is large enough, any assistant principals. Also included would be those district administrators whose decisions often play an important role in the performance of every school in a district. In short, I'd regard just about any educational administrator, whether functioning at the school, district, state, or provincial levels, as a bona fide school leader. Those folks are supposed to be improving the quality of schools for which they're responsible.

But what about teachers? Can classroom teachers also be school leaders? Well, I certainly think so—but only in certain instances. I believe teachers are school leaders *when those teachers contribute to the educational effectiveness of their teacher colleagues*. For example, a fourth-grade teacher who creates a year-long teacher-learning community in her school so some of the school's teachers could more effectively differentiate their own instructional activities should surely be regarded as a school leader. So would a middle school English teacher who supplies monthly e-mail suggestions to all of his school's teachers regarding how best to get teenagers to read with greater comprehension *and pleasure*. In short, not only should all educational administrators be considered school leaders, but the label of school leader should also be properly pinned on any classroom teacher who's trying to improve a school's

curriculum, its instruction, or the evaluation procedures used in that school.

### A PREOCCUPATION WITH “UNDERSTANDING”

I’ve written books about educational assessment in the past. Most of those were fairly traditional textbooks, the kind used in a graduate course such as “educational tests and measurements.” There is a need for such books, and I confess that I’ve picked up several serious royalty checks from having written those sorts of measurement textbooks. But this is not a book written for such a course. No, this is a book written specifically for educational leaders who want to learn what they truly need to know about the assessment concepts likely to intrude on their professional lives.

I have not written this book to teach readers how to *perform* assessment-related procedures, such as actually computing a reliability coefficient or carrying out a real-life alignment study to match a test’s content with a set of curricular goals. For those readers who want to become adept at carrying out such procedures, I’ll point out where this sort of information can be obtained. But the focus of this book is exclusively on a reader’s *understanding* the nature of the assessment concepts and procedures described herein. Surgeons who repair their patients’ malfunctioning organs need not perform, in person, their own preoperation laboratory tests; but they surely must understand what the results of those tests signify. Similarly, school leaders need not build and administer classroom assessments or large-scale accountability tests, but they must understand, at least in general terms, how those sorts of tests are built and what their results signify.

So, if you are looking for a book that will help you discover how to actually carry out a host of assessment-related procedures, put this book down and grab another. My intention here is to describe such assessment procedures *only* as a way of helping you gain an intuitive understanding of how

those procedures work. The push in the pages that follow will be to help you grasp the essence of what's going on when important educational assessment operations take place.

Indeed, at the close of each chapter, I'll lay out the most important notions associated with that chapter's content in the form of Crucial Understandings. An understanding that's *crucial*, according to my dictionary, is one "of vital or critical importance," and each chapter will end up with its very own small set of Crucial Understandings. As you read the book, I certainly hope you'll pick up other assessment-related understandings along the way, but if you "own" the Crucial Understandings in the book's first nine chapters, you'll definitely know what a competent school leader truly needs to know about educational assessment.

Also at the end of each chapter, you'll find a *very small* handful of Recommended Reading suggestions. At the close of the entire book, you'll find a complete compilation of these end-of-chapter suggestions in the Recommended Reading Roundup. The Roundup presents complete bibliographic information for all of the chapters' recommended readings along with a brief annotation for each of the recommendations. If you wish to follow up on any of the end-of-chapter suggestions, a quick scan of the relevant annotations should enable you to decide whether to tackle any of the end-of-chapter recommendations.

## COMMUNICABLE UNDERSTANDINGS

Okay, so the book will be trying to get you to understand what's most important about a series of educational-assessment concepts and procedures. I hope such an aspiration makes sense to you. Nevertheless, we currently live in an era when a school leader's attainment of such understandings—all by itself—just isn't enough! That's because a variety of groups also need to understand much more than they currently do about educational assessment. I'm thinking specifically of parents, educational policymakers, laypeople, and even students

themselves. Today's school leaders who understand educational assessment, therefore, have an important additional responsibility—and that responsibility is to relay relevant assessment-related understandings to those who, like themselves, need such understandings.

Let me illustrate. Please imagine that you happen to be a district associate superintendent, and your district's students have just earned a set of so-so scores on your state's annual accountability tests. Does this mean your district's schools are doing a rotten instructional job? An editorial in the local newspaper entitled, "Our Shoddy Schools," might assert this is precisely what's going on. But what if the nature of your state's accountability tests makes students' scores on those tests more dependent on the socioeconomic composition of the district's students than on the effectiveness with which those students have been taught? In short, what may be going on in this fictional situation could be a function of inappropriate state-level accountability tests rather than a reflection of ineffectual instruction.

Remembering that you are still an imaginary associate superintendent, what you need to be able to do is communicate to your district's citizens, and particularly to the parents of your district's students, *why it is* that the district's scores on the state test may be an inaccurate indicator of how well the district's students are actually being taught. In other words, you *personally* need to understand key concepts about the appropriateness of accountability tests well enough to explain those concepts to relevant constituencies—in a manner so that those other groups will understand what they need to understand.

So, in a very real sense, what is being sought from you by this book is a sort of "understanding-plus," that is, a higher-than-usual level of understanding. What the book aspires for you to attain is a level of understanding that permits you to effectively communicate what you know about assessment to those individuals who, themselves, have a stake in the many assessment-linked decisions that seem to almost surround our schools.

When you have finished the book's first nine chapters, in Chapter 10 you can quickly review its entire set of per-chapter Crucial Understandings. If you are able to relay at least a general understanding of those understandings to others, then this will make you a successful reader and, of course, will make me a successful writer. As you move through the book, therefore, try to comprehend what you're reading at a deeper level than you might ordinarily bring to a typical professional-development book. The understandings you will acquire in the following pages, if you are a true school leader, will not be for you alone. You must, indeed, comprehend these assessment understandings not only for yourself but also for others. School leadership has its distinctive responsibilities, one of which is for school leaders to elevate the levels of assessment-related understandings of those around them.

Today's educators, and especially our school leaders, are buffeted almost daily by issues linked to educational assessment. School leaders need to know such stuff. I desperately hope this book helps you to do just that.

—W. J. P.  
January 2010