

Virginia's Student-Led Assessment Networked Improvement Community: Coming Together for Systems Change

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About This Series

This series of field-facing memos describes promising assessment for learning practices. The series examines the various ways in which Assessment for Learning Project grantees are using, adapting, and creating assessment practices oriented to learning. To see the full series, please visit https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/Assessment_for_Learning_Project. This research is made possible with funding from the Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky.

The [Assessment for Learning Project](#) (ALP) is a multi-year grant program and field-building initiative designed to fundamentally rethink the roles that assessment can and should play to advance student learning and improve K–12 education in the United States. If assessment is to become a lever for improving individual students' opportunities and capacities to learn, then assessment must also become a lever for achieving more equitable education outcomes. Led by the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE) at the University of Kentucky in partnership with Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC), the ALP project aims to develop the field's professional capacity to design and assess learning experiences in ways that simultaneously promote meaningful and equitable student learning. This memo highlights the work of Virginia's Student-Led Assessment Networked Improvement Community.

This memo describes how 11 Virginia school divisions—what, in most states, are referred to as districts—have come together to form a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) focused on increasing the use of student-led assessment practices. Student-led assessment describes “the range of approaches by which students are involved in collecting and evaluating evidence of their learning” (Marion, 2018). For example, this might take the form of students leading their own conferences, working with teachers to design their own assessments, choosing how they will demonstrate their learning, or setting their own learning goals. The goal of these approaches is to increase students' agency and ownership of their learning and assessment experiences. One of the practices being adopted in the NIC are capstones—a culminating project through which students demonstrate their knowledge and skills—because they allow for student choice over the topic of study and final products as well as encourage self-monitoring and self-assessment throughout the process. As part of a capstone experience, for example, students might engage in a year-long research project, driven by questions that they individually identify, and then choose how they present the findings from their research and reflect upon their growth as a learner to an audience of peers, teachers, and community members.



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The work of this NIC is supported by local- and state-level efforts to reimagine assessment in ways that shift the balance from a heavy focus on standardized assessments to one that prioritizes student-centered learning. Reductions in state assessment requirements; efforts to develop the Profile of a Virginia Graduate, which describes what college- and career-ready graduates know and can do; and state and local investments in performance assessment have created a supportive context for the divisions involved in the NIC to

transform their assessment systems. Further, the NIC's use of improvement science practices—systematic approaches to understanding critical problems and developing promising solutions—encouraged shared goal setting, progress monitoring, and iterative cycles that supported learning and refinement of the group's ideas for improving student-centered learning. In this memo, we describe how this collective effort to reimagine assessment fostered sustained improvements in the midst of leadership churn.

Big Ideas and Insights From This Memo

- Establishing clear design principles for student-led assessment can support a stronger collective understanding of the practice and encourage the development of assessments with student-led components.
- Capstones address multiple principles of student-led assessment, including incorporating student voice in assessment experiences, products and processes that are meaningful to students, self-monitoring, and self-assessment.
- Systems change requires not only bottom-up and top-down efforts but also strong lateral networks to create positive pressure and support for transforming assessment.
- Reciprocal efforts to transform assessment practices led by educators and policymakers can help to support, reinforce, and sustain systems change.
- Broad, cohesive support across levels of the system fosters sustainability even in the midst of leadership change.
- Defining a clear, shared goal for increasing opportunities for student-led assessment is critical for gaining strong commitment for working towards this goal and measuring progress.
- Improvement science practices can encourage action, reflection, and an iterative approach to shared goal setting and progress monitoring.
- The Networked Improvement Community, or NIC, structure can serve as a way to bring diverse schools together to advance a common aim in ways that are appropriate for their unique contexts.

Why Assessment for (Rather Than of) Learning is Needed

Most educators recognize that standardized tests are inadequate for knowing how to improve student performance and teaching practice. Many would also agree with researcher David Conley (2015) who observed, “Over the past ten years, educators have learned the distinction between summative and formative assessments” (p. 27). Yet, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit, Linda Pittenger (2014), David Conley (2015), and others have argued that educators still need to deepen their assessment knowledge and use a broader range of assessments in order to prepare students adequately for college, career, and life. They point to recent research that has identified “a much more comprehensive, multi-faceted, and rich portrait of what constitutes a college-ready student,” and argue that we now know adequate preparation for college, career, and life will require “much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics” (Conley, p. 12). Thus, they describe the increasing importance for students to know how to handle assignments or tasks that do not have one right answer, to raise pertinent questions, to gather additional information, to reason with evidence, and, ultimately, to make judgments in complex and dynamic situations.

Developing such abilities in our youth will help students engage in what they are learning and have ample opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage successfully with complexity. Standardized assessments neither teach nor measure such skills. Therefore, to help students be well prepared to succeed in college, career, and life, a broad range of assessments and instructional practices are needed that

develop students’ abilities to think deeply, to reason with evidence, to make connections across subjects, and to formulate meaningful questions. Providing access to assessments that measure ambitious learning and supporting teachers to use these assessment approaches to help students learn are also important levers for equity.

ALP Grantees are Developing Assessment for Learning Practices

Given the significant need for the development and use of assessments that promote and measure more complex student-learning outcomes, ALP has awarded grants to a group of organizations—including individual schools, charter school organizations, a state department of education, public school districts, and intermediary organizations—that are developing assessment approaches that foreground learning. In its unique approach to grant making, ALP actively supports its grantees and the organizations they serve to continue to learn in and from their individual and collective assessment for learning work. The grantees featured in this series of memos were selected with ALP’s assistance and represent the full range of grantee-types in the project. The aim is to identify and observe promising assessment for learning practices in use by grantees, learn about the development and implementation of these practices, and consider to what extent these practices advance ALP’s [learning agenda](#).

Student-Led Assessment Principles and Practices

Working collectively to increase students’ opportunities to “lead” their assessment experiences is challenging because student-led assessment can include many different approaches, such as student-led conferences or capstone experiences. Thus, one of the

first tasks of the NIC was to define what they meant by student-led assessment. Consequently, the NIC worked collectively to develop a student-led assessment continuum, which helps educators to assess their progress against five design principles of student-led assessment intended to encourage a more student-centered assessment process:

- Voice and choice is demonstrated in the assessment experience and products.
- Assessment process and products are meaningful to the student.
- Students set goals, chart their growth, and share their learning/growth.
- Feedback occurs throughout the process.
- Students self-assess and reflect.

One leader in the NIC described the student-led assessment continuum as “the most impressive” accomplishment of the NIC. She explained:

It allows folks to look at and examine their assessments and identify gaps so that they can then revise their assessments to make [them] more student-led. That is one thing that our teachers are working on and reflecting on about their current assessment experiences. Before then, we really didn’t say what it looked like or what student-led assessment meant to our network. That’s been the biggest development. Now that it’s finalized or at least in a place where we feel comfortable with it, I just think that the work is going to accelerate now that we have a clear definition.

In other words, the continuum provides both a definition of student-led assessment and acts as a tool that provides ideas for increasing student ownership in the assessment process. As shown in Exhibit 1 (next page), the continuum includes information about multiple dimensions—such as the methods for

demonstrating what has been learned—that determine whether an assessment is student-led, is the shared responsibility of students and educators, or is adult-led. Educators can use this information, for example, to create a new assessment or revise an existing assessment that includes a student-led dimension by allowing students to choose the approach by which they demonstrate their learning (i.e., writing, oral presentation, visual display, etc.).

One of the student-led assessment practices that NIC leaders described as most successful were capstones. Data collected from student surveys, interviews, and focus groups suggested that using capstone assessments helps to engage students more deeply in their own assessment and in school more broadly. One educator described her capstone work as “night and day” from what teachers were doing previously in her school. She explained that, eight years ago, they were giving “50-item multiple choice” tests as the end of year assessment, but now students publicly defend their learning as part of their capstones. For the capstone, 11th graders identify their own research questions, engage in extended inquiry, and present their findings to an interdisciplinary panel of faculty members and a class of their peers. At the summer convening of the NIC, teachers from this educator’s high school shared videos of students’ capstone work. In one clip, a student described her capstone research on the effects of positive student-teacher relationships: “This capstone really, really got me invested in school. This is something that I’m doing in school that I get to pour what I really care [about] into.” She described herself as a “kid who hated school and now loves school” because of this project, which allowed her to conduct an in-depth investigation on a topic that was personally meaningful to her.

Exhibit 1: Continuum of Student-Led Assessment

Dimension	Student-led	Shared responsibility	Adult-led
Long-term, big-picture learning goals (e.g., graduation competencies)	Students are free to define the key competencies for which they will be held accountable	Students and educators negotiate the specific competencies required of each student	Adults define the competencies (e.g., communication, research) that all students must meet
Shorter-term learning targets (e.g., grade, course, or unit competencies or standards)	Students define the specific learning targets they wish to pursue in a given course or unit within the parameters of the course/unit	Students are expected to demonstrate learning of a subset of course competencies along with choice of additional learning targets	All students must demonstrate learning of the same course/unit learning targets (e.g., standards, competencies)
Learning experiences (e.g., how students are expected to learn the content and skills)	Students have freedom to determine how they will learn the identified content and skills	None Students and educators negotiate the ways in which students are able to learn the specific content and skills	Students are directed in how they are expected to learn the specific content and skills (e.g., lecture, specific activities)
Methods and approaches for demonstrating what has been learned	Students are free to choose the approaches by which they demonstrate their learning in a specific course, unit, or lesson	Students may select from an educator-defined menu for demonstrating their learning (e.g., a paper, slide deck, or video)	Students must demonstrate their learning according to teacher-determined methods (e.g., a paper with specific requirements)
Evaluating the demonstration of learning and interpreting the results	Students are responsible for evaluating their own learning and these student evaluations are what “count”	Students produce self- evaluations that are combined with educator judgments to produce final evaluations via rules negotiated among the educators and students	Teachers or other adults are fully responsible for evaluating the quality of the learning demonstration (e.g., scoring the assessment results)

Source: Marion et al, 2018

Although some divisions in the state use capstones for all students at certain grade levels, most are early in the process of learning about and implementing capstone assessments. Thus, NIC members are working together to support divisions in making progress in increasing the use of capstones across grade levels. In some cases, this includes developing capstones at each schooling level—elementary, middle, and high school—to integrate student-led assessment at all levels of schooling. One first step to encouraging the broader use of capstones was for NIC members to develop a planning tool and rubric that fifth-grade teachers could use to plan and implement a capstone assessment. NIC members describe this set of materials as one of their “improvement packages” because it aims to support student-led assessment practices in ways that are specific enough to encourage immediate action but flexible enough to be used in diverse division contexts.

A Promising Context for Systems Change

Virginia’s Student-Led Assessment NIC brought together district leaders, school leaders, and teachers from 11 divisions in the state to address a shared problem of practice—students had little ownership over the assessment process in their schools. Instead, assessment was typically something that was done to students rather than with them. A leader of the NIC explained their theory of change:

We wanted to put students more in the driver seat of their assessment process, with the thinking that, because assessment is so high-stakes in Virginia...if students are more engaged in the assessment process overall, perhaps they’ll be more engaged in their learning.

Notably, the focus of this community reflects shifts happening at both the state and local levels of the education system. In Virginia, state policymakers have taken important steps to redesign their system of assessments in ways that prioritize learning and connect more closely with local goals for curriculum and student learning. In 2014, the Virginia General Assembly passed House Bill 930, replacing five state-directed exams with local assessments, which reduced standardized testing in elementary and middle school from 21 to 16 separate assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Subsequently, the Virginia Board of Education developed guidelines to assist local districts with this transition, specifically recommending the use of performance assessments to meet local alternative assessment guidelines. Although performance assessments are not required, the state is encouraging and supporting their use by funding professional development. Leaders from the Virginia Department of Education describe the recent legislation and professional development investments as part of an effort to support an incremental shift in assessment toward an increased use of performance assessments (and other “authentic assessments”) in place of more traditional multiple-choice exams (Stosich, Snyder, & Wilczak, 2018). Similarly, school divisions in Virginia are redesigning their systems of assessment in ways that give students greater control over their learning by implementing performance assessments, such as capstones, that give students choice in how they demonstrate their skills and competencies. Further, these capstones align with the Profile of a Virginia Graduate’s focus on developing interdisciplinary skills among students, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, and communication.

The leaders of Virginia’s Student-Led Assessment NIC describe the reciprocal connections between their efforts and the state and local policy shifts as providing support and credibility for their improvement work. Specifically, policymakers seek out examples and guidance from educators who are members of the NIC as they make decisions about assessment policy. One of the central leaders in the NIC provided an example to illustrate the connection between policy decisions and the work of the NIC:

Just to give you a sense of the connection between our work and the policy, when it was being presented to legislators and they were having to make some decisions, the people that were talking to them and addressing them, were principals and superintendents from our NIC....And so the fact that...this is connected to a national conversation, was influential for the legislators...in terms of helping shape their thinking about what’s best for kids moving forward and that there’s credibility to this idea that it doesn’t all have to be standardized and multiple choice.

In essence, the connection to policy, as well as the larger ALP network’s efforts to redesign assessment, provides a sense of legitimacy for the ongoing work of the NIC. Another leader in the NIC explained that their focus on student-led assessment emerged as a result of the larger state assessment shifts:

This alignment between the state’s emphasis on creating high quality assessments and encouraging innovation led to this intersection where really students need to be engaged in this, not only engaged in their assessment but need to take ownership of their assessment.

As described by this leader, educators in the NIC and across the state are working to increase students’ involvement and ownership of assessment by increasing students’ role in choosing the way they demonstrate their learning, as exemplified by capstones, and increasing opportunities for students to set their learning goals and monitor their own progress.

Goal Setting Encourages Collective Action and Progress Monitoring

One of the strengths of Virginia’s Student-Led Assessment NIC is the clearly defined goal to which all members are committed. As one of the leaders of the NIC explained:

The goal, or the collective aim, of our group is to have 10,000 students across 11 Virginia divisions experience a student-led assessment by June of 2019. That’s our marker in the sand....In [defining a] student-led assessment experience, we have very specific design principles or criteria around that. That’s our goal.... Right now, our current count is about 3,000 students that have experienced a student-led assessment experience.

As Bryk and colleagues (2015) explain, “Framed as a declaration of lofty purpose, a NIC aim statement should inspire individuals to see themselves as part of a larger narrative—as members of a community engaged in a highly-valued pursuit” (p. 150). A clear and measurable goal, the NIC aim statement can support collective learning and improvement as members of the community assess their success in advancing this goal.

Members of the NIC are using the Continuum of Student-Led Assessment to determine whether assessments currently being used in their schools and divisions include dimensions that are student-led (see Exhibit 1, p. 5). Specifically, members of the NIC have engaged

in a process of reviewing their current assessments to determine whether they include at least one dimension on the continuum that is fully student-led. Importantly, this is not a simple measurement activity. Instead, this process helps to support a deeper understanding of what it means for assessments to be student-led and has encouraged conversations among NIC members about the actions they can take to increase the extent to which their assessments are student-led.

Improvement Science Practices Sustain Improvement Efforts Amidst Leadership Churn

Improvement science is an approach intended to accelerate learning-by-doing by encouraging rapid tests of change ideas as part of an ongoing inquiry process. As one NIC leader explained, using improvement science helped them move from a more theoretical understanding of the problem to taking action to address this problem: “As we used improvement science... we spent a lot of time thinking about the problem...It went from the theoretical—so what do we mean by student-led assessment... to how we implement these kinds of practices.” Four central principles of improvement science have influenced the work of Virginia’s Student-Led Assessment NIC (Bryk et al., 2015):

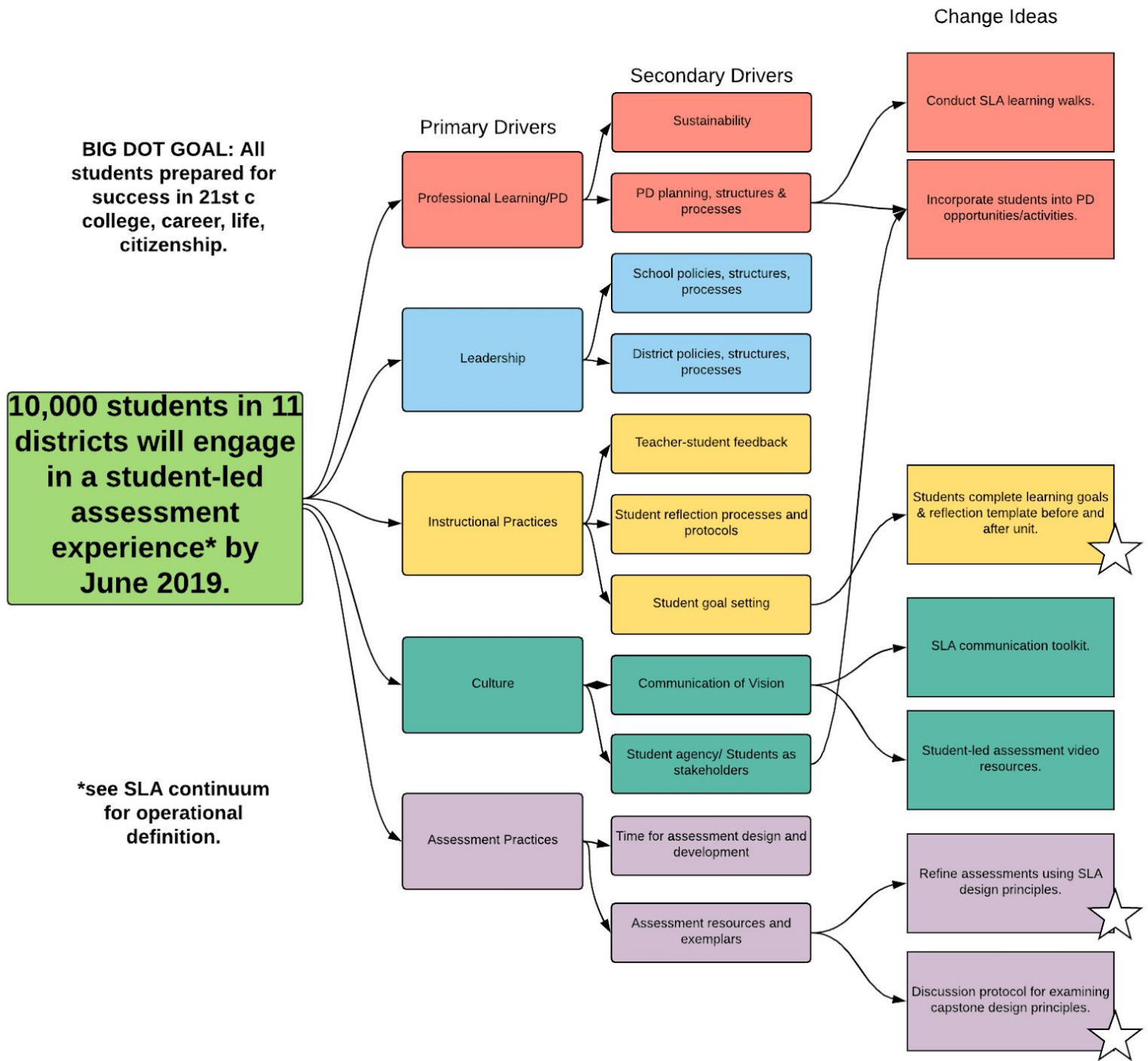
- Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.
- We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure.
- Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry.
- Accelerate improvements through networked communities.

Specifically, Virginia’s Student-Led Assessment NIC was formed to address the problem of limited student involvement in and ownership

of the assessment process. As described above, a critical task for the group was to define “student-led” assessment in a measurable way so that they could better understand students’ current opportunities to engage in student-led assessment and whether the changes they were making as part of their improvement efforts were actually increasing these opportunities for students in participating divisions. Members of the NIC have been focused on implementing, reflecting on, and revising change ideas intended to support student-led assessment, which is part of their ongoing inquiry work. These change ideas include incorporating student reflection opportunities in curriculum units, refining assessments using the student-led assessment continuum, and developing and strengthening student capstones (see Exhibit 2, next page). Notably, all of this work is supported by the NIC, which includes 11 “nodes” or cross-role (e.g., district leaders, school leaders, teachers) teams from each participating division and three “hub” leaders who convene and support the work of the network.

The network hub members can serve as trainers and coaches in improvement science methods. Further, the hub members can bring attention to and reinforce improvement science principles and practices. As one hub leader explained, improvement science pushed educators to ask, “Is this working?” rather than simply focusing on implementation of a new idea. As part of this, improvement science practices encourage practitioners to start with a small change idea to test and refine, ensuring that this change truly represents an improvement before implementing it at a larger scale. Hub leaders reinforced improvement science principles and practices as they supported NIC members. For example, during a summer convening of the NIC, hub leaders sat with small groups from across the participating divisions and facilitated their efforts to refine their change ideas. In one group, a hub

Exhibit 2: Virginia Student-Led Assessment Networked Improvement Community (NIC) Driver Diagram



leader prodded the participants, encouraging them to focus on one small change they could make, reinforcing the focus on action and reflection as part of the inquiry process. The hub leader probed the group: “What are you testing with who[m] first?... Could you in all of your districts do just 7th grade for the test?” Similarly, in another group, a different hub leader explained why they were starting by planning just one part of the professional development—the introduction—that would support teachers in learning to use the student-led assessment continuum: “Just a little about how we’re going to approach this as part of the networked improvement community approach...so part of the reason we landed on the intro [to the professional development session] was because it was a bite that we could start with and test.” As illustrated in these examples, the NIC hub leaders played a critical role in pushing educators to move away from more general discussion of ideas to specific and manageable plans for action. This focus on testing is part of an improvement science mindset and also helped to maintain momentum among members of the NIC by focusing on concrete actions they could take to integrate student-led assessment in their own context.

One of the major challenges the group has faced has been changes in leadership in participating divisions in the NIC. These changes have included major shifts, such as new division superintendents, as well as changing roles for existing NIC members and the addition of new NIC members. Shifting participation means that there is significant variability in experience and expertise in improvement science practice among NIC members. This has made the role of the hub leaders all the more important. A hub leader explained that, in the first two years of the network, they did more work developing members’ ability to use improvement science practices, but

the changes in leadership have meant that improvement science is “sprinkled throughout the room.” Given their limited time together as a NIC—four convenings a year—they have made the decision to move forward with their focus on implementing their change ideas rather than continuing training on improvement science practices. Nevertheless, the shared goals and NIC structure have been essential for sustaining the improvement efforts of the group. Specifically, the cross-role and cross-divisional structure has developed broad and sustained support for student-led assessment among participating divisions, which is further strengthened by the supportive policy context in the state.

The NIC’s ongoing work is supported by setting clear, shared goals for increasing student-led assessment experiences and grounding these goals in a shared vision for student-led assessment, as defined by the Continuum of Student-Led Assessment. Further, hub leaders in the NIC have aimed to focus on change ideas—what they call improvement packages—that represent specific and manageable changes that can be put in place in diverse school and division contexts. In essence, Virginia’s Student-led Assessment NIC aims to make their bold vision for assessment reform a reality by using an iterative process of testing and progress monitoring focused on small changes that, when successful, are scaled to additional classrooms, schools, and divisions.

Reflection Questions

The reflection questions are intended to spark conversation about how efforts to develop student-centered learning and assessment practices in schools can improve students' learning experiences and outcomes.

- As illustrated in the Continuum of Student-Led Assessment, there are multiple dimensions that can be addressed to increase student ownership of assessment. Consider students' current assessment experiences in your school or system. What experiences allow for the greatest student control over what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their learning? Where do you give students the most control—learning goals, learning experiences, demonstrating learning, or evaluating their progress? How could you increase students' ownership of their assessment experiences?
- Capstones are a practice that can incorporate multiple principles of student-led assessment by allowing for student voice and choice over the topics of inquiry, selection of a focus that is meaningful to the student, and incorporating self-assessment and reflection into the evaluation process. Although they are most typical in high school, they can be used effectively in elementary and middle school as well. How have you or could you use capstones to support greater student involvement in their assessment experiences?
- In Virginia, state policies—including the reduction in state assessment requirements, the adoption of the Profile of a Virginia Graduate, and funding for professional development on performance assessment—have created supportive conditions for assessment redesign. How do your school's or district's current assessment practices align or conflict with your state and district policies? What, if any, existing policies allow for or encourage student choice and voice in the assessment process?
- Improvement science practices can encourage collective goal setting, action, reflection, and progress monitoring. How do the practices used in the Virginia NIC connect to your school or district strategies for supporting improvement? How might you use improvement science practices to better support these improvement efforts?

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