



The Missing Link

Why Assessments
and Curriculum
Must Work Together



Dear Colleagues and Partners in Education,

As ANet turns 20, I've been thinking less about celebration and more about contradiction.

Two decades ago, we were founded on a simple promise: that assessments, used well, could unlock better teaching and learning. If we gave educators clear, timely information, they could make powerful moves for students.

But somewhere along the way, we got stuck.

Over the last two decades, our education system quadrupled its investment in formative assessments, yet student outcomes haven't improved.¹ We created sprawling systems to monitor performance, but not to fuel better teaching or learning. Across the country, we built systems that track progress, flag gaps, and sort performance. But they rarely help teachers teach better tomorrow than they did today.



Too many assessment systems diagnose failure. Too few help design success.

I've sat in classrooms with teachers who are trying everything: pulling lessons from multiple sources, trying to meet students where they are, and drowning in data that tells them what's wrong but not what to do next. I've seen students quietly absorb the message that math isn't for them, long before they have a real chance to engage with it.

Because here's the reality:

- Nearly 90% of teachers are mixing and matching content, trying to make district materials work.²
- As many as one-third of teachers abandon a new curriculum within three months of adoption.³
- Students lose 100 hours a year to testing, with little to show for it.⁴
- And many educators spend more than 40 hours each year analyzing data they often can't use.⁵

This isn't a failure of effort; it's a failure of design.

What I have been reminded of along the way is that assessment cannot be a separate system. It must be core to the instructional strategy. And, instructional coherence isn't a luxury. It's what makes real opportunity possible.

That gap between what we measure and how we teach is the *Missing Link*.

It's the space where insights should become action, but too often don't.

This white paper identifies the *Missing Link*, traces why it's been missing, and offers a new path forward.

Today, we're introducing a new assessment category and solution: High-Quality Instructional Assessment (HQIA). HQIA is not just about measuring learning. It's about fueling it. It's about assessments that are woven into the fabric of instruction, not something that interrupts it. It's about giving teachers tools that show not just whether a student is struggling, but why – and how to help.

We know HQIA works, because we have data from ANet partner schools supporting more than 26,000 students over two years showing just how powerful it is.

ANet partners – partners who prioritize tools designed to turn insights into actions year over year – outperform their peers in math and ELA. In this white paper, we're sharing what challenges schools face, along with how the solution works. We'll even introduce you to just one of those schools, Children's Aid College Prep Charter School (Children's Aid), and share the impact HQIA has on its students.

We are at an inflection point. And if we don't move with intention, if we don't close the gap between assessment and instruction, **we risk losing another generation to the inertia of good ideas without impact.**

In these pages, you'll find our reflections and our challenge, to ourselves and to the field: to rethink, to reimagine, and ultimately, to dare to do something different. We invite you to join us in this moment of collective reflection and action. Because the most powerful thing we can do is center our accountability where it truly belongs: in the lives and futures of the young people we serve.

Let this be a call to bridge the gaps we've identified, and to use assessments that are not just measurement tools, but catalysts for meaningful learning.

Osarugue "Michelle" Odemwingie
ANet CEO





TABLE OF CONTENTS

05 | ALEX'S STORY

08 | THE PROBLEM

13 | THE SOLUTION

19 | THE MISSING LINK

23 | THE DECISION POINT

24 | SOURCES

WHY ASSESSMENTS MATTER:

Alex's Story

Fifth grader Alex* was so stressed about math that his stomach hurt. The subject made him feel like he would never get it. Never be good enough. Smart enough.

He dreaded math so much that his mom reached out to Children's Aid teacher Jesus Salgado** to express her concern. His mom wanted what every parent wants: for her child to succeed. She worried her son was struggling too much, and the class wasn't a good fit.

As a teacher, education leader or advocate, we all know someone like Alex. And we all know that in an education system that often reduces students to data points, these students too easily fall through the cracks.

Mr. Salgado could have labeled Alex as “not a math student” and moved on. But **he wouldn't let that happen**. He knew he was going to help Alex, and he knew just where to start.

“I told Alex that frustration is good. Frustration means you want to try and do better,” Mr. Salgado shared.

Mr. Salgado's school invested in something different to help prevent students like Alex from giving up and falling further behind: a coherent system where assessments and high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) worked together seamlessly. That system gave Mr. Salgado the tools he needed to fight for Alex.



Mr. Salgado leveraged an assessment that provided immediate, detailed insights into a student's understanding of the learning concepts in each lesson. It helped him adjust instruction where and when it matters most, using HQIM he already had. Read more about HQIA on page 13.

Instead of guessing, Mr. Salgado could turn to his assessments to truly understand Alex's needs.

If he used an old assessment model, Mr. Salgado would only have known that Alex was struggling with multiplication.

Using HQIA, he was able to pinpoint not just WHAT Alex was struggling with, but also WHY and HOW Alex was struggling. Mr. Salgado could then use his HQIM to overcome those challenges.

With the help of ANet's strategic coaching, **Mr. Salgado was able to uncover a common student misconception:** the standard algorithm for multiplication wasn't clicking, leading to deep frustration.

Mr. Salgado and Alex tried using area models. Suddenly, a light turned on. Alex wasn't just solving problems; he was beginning to believe he could do math!

With quick, actionable results from HQIA, Mr. Salgado could see every step forward. He placed Alex in a small group with peers who brought out Alex's strengths and boosted his confidence. Mr. Salgado also shared guidance with Alex's mom, so she could help him practice at home.

Because regular, easy-to-use assessments are now a core part of Children's Aid teaching, Mr. Salgado didn't have to guess if his new approach was working. He tracked Alex's progress consistently, getting a clear view of his growth. He could share feedback with Alex quickly, answer his questions, and continue building his confidence. It felt like a true partnership.

"From one assessment to the next, Alex went from a 1 to a 2. He was still a little disappointed, but I said, that's growth. You can do this," Mr. Salgado said. "You have to celebrate that growth."

Alex continued working hard, with not only Mr. Salgado, but his classmates cheering him on. By his state level test, Alex scored a 3 – showing just how much his hard work and partnership with Mr. Salgado paid off.

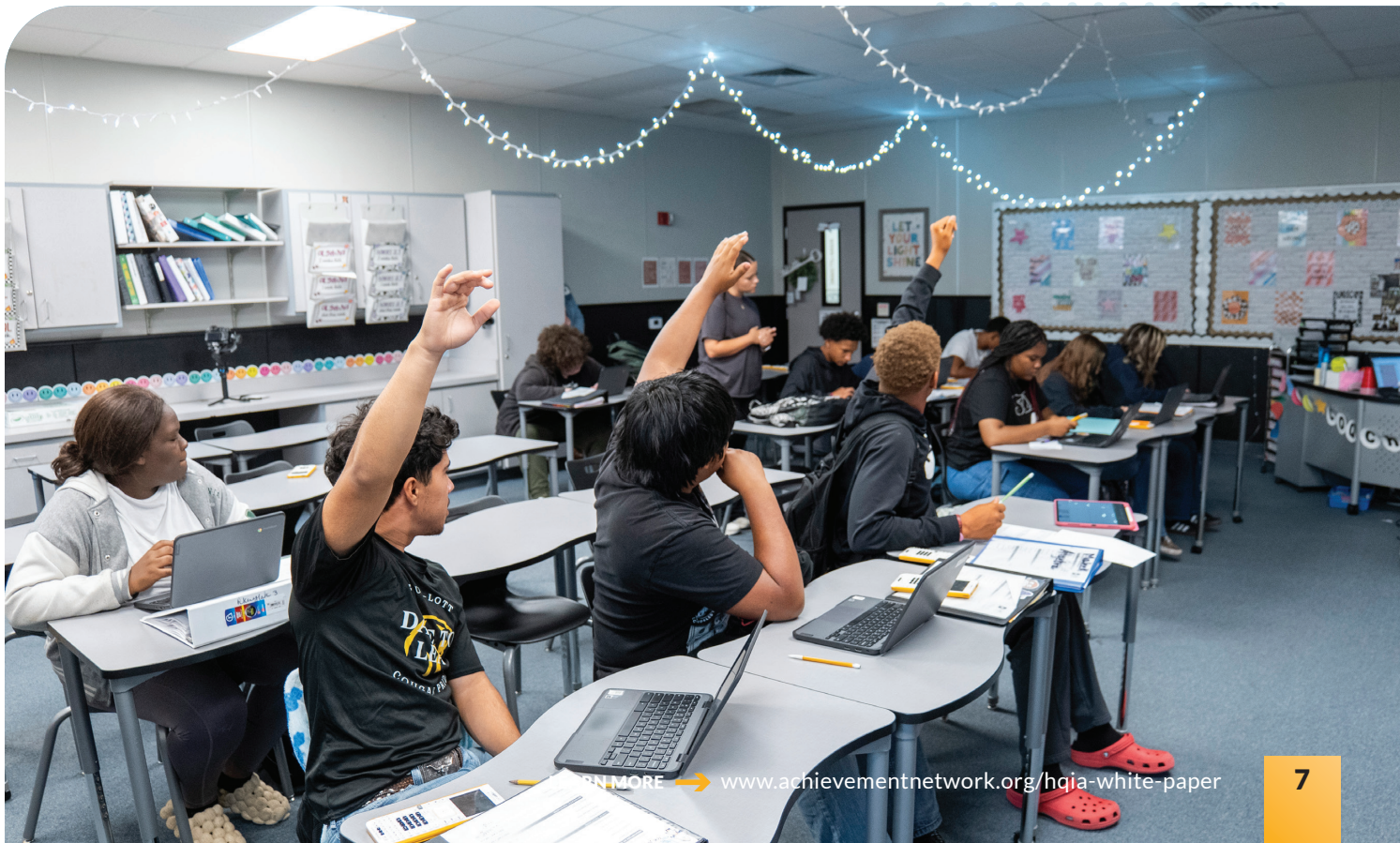
This improvement was about more than scores. It was about Alex feeling confident and excited to learn. It was about him feeling like math IS for him.

Now, math is Alex’s favorite class.

As educators, we are accountable to our students. From frustration to success, Alex’s journey shows what’s possible when there is no *Missing Link*. By pairing the clarity of HQIA and the excellence of HQIM, we stop asking teachers to work within a faulty system. We offer a new system where **teachers like Mr. Salgado instruct with precision, and students like Alex are capable, engaged learners.**

**We’re using a pseudonym to protect Alex’s privacy. All other details are true!*

***Mr. Salgado now serves as Dean of Students and Culture at Children’s Aid.*



THE PROBLEM:

The Assessment Disconnect

We've poured billions into curriculum and training. But as a field, we're still ignoring a fundamental system design flaw: **assessments and instructional materials**, the very tools meant to help students, are pushing schools in opposite directions.

* Most assessments still measure the wrong things, in the wrong way, at the wrong time.

This creates structural misalignment that undermines teachers – forcing them to choose between teaching what's right and teaching what's tested.

And it's our students who pay the price.

Our field can't move forward until we face **three hard truths** about the way most current assessments are impacting teaching and learning.

THE DISCONNECT IS STAGGERING:

Only one-third of teachers⁶

say it's easy to figure out how to use their interim test data to inform their instruction.

1

Today's Data is a Costly Distraction, Not a Tool for Instruction

Over the past 20 years, districts have quadrupled their spending on formative assessments. Yet in that same time, student performance has declined. The data isn't just costly – it's failing to deliver on its purpose. For years, assessments have operated on a completely separate track from daily teaching and learning. The result is a **crisis of coherence**.

With siloed systems, the current approach **predicts failure instead of preventing it**. This isn't worthwhile data... **It's an expensive distraction.**

FOR TEACHERS:

Teachers don't need more numbers.

They need coherent data that reveals both the *why* and the *how* – data that illuminates the story and insights that tell them what to do next.

Yet, today's assessment system misses the whole point.

It identifies a student's wrong answer, but too often stops short before revealing the **underlying misconception** behind that error. **It leaves the root cause of a mistake misunderstood and unaddressed.**⁷

And it pushes teachers in the wrong direction, sending them to search for fixes outside their curriculum and failing to connect them to materials that already offer the right support.

We leave teachers without a clear strategy and students without the guidance they need.



FOR DISTRICT LEADERS:

Today's assessment system is making your job harder.

If your district-level assessment data is not aligned to curriculum, it can't be rolled up into a coherent, district-wide picture.

- You can't capture the patterns behind student learning or see where teachers need support the most. Professional development becomes more of a guess than a guide, and valuable instructional time is lost.
- You have no real way to trace the return on your curriculum investment. You're accountable for an investment you can't even honestly evaluate.

Frustration from the community members you care most about – teachers, parents, and the board – can all land on your desk, and you're **left defending a system you already know is broken.**

FOR STUDENTS:

This whole approach is a **lost opportunity.**

Year after year, we cling to the misguided belief that more tests – one for growth, another for diagnostics, another for placement – will add up to insight.

Instead of providing timely feedback, this system disrupts and often stalls student learning.

We're **wasting time and undermining student progress** – not to mention motivation.

Students now spend up to 100 hours testing every year. We administer tests designed to name problems, not solve them. **And collect assessment data about students, not for them.**

This system is fundamentally disconnected from its purpose: student success.



2

We're Asking Teachers to Do the Unreasonable and Impossible

We've left teachers wastefully working in the dark.

For decades, we've focused on the wrong question. Instead of asking teachers not to teach to the test, we should have been asking: Are we confident we are testing what was taught?

As a district leader, you're forced to ask teachers to do an impossible task: make sense of misaligned results and use that data to guide instruction.



WHEN ONLY 38% OF TEACHERS RECEIVE ANY TRAINING AT ALL on how to align their assessment → to data → to their everyday practice, we leave them in a state of freeze or frustration, all at their students' expense.⁸

That means instead of letting teachers focus on being excellent educators, we've asked them to be data scientists, too.

Imagine if only a fraction of doctors knew how to make sense of their lab results to support patient health. This would be an urgent public health breakdown.

We would never accept this level of failure in any other field.

Yet, in education, we're choosing to accept and even normalize this.

3

Low-Quality Assessments Harm, Not Help

Too many assessments reduce students to labels, ranking and sorting them instead of helping them learn. In our efforts to comply with accountability systems, we've let accountability itself become the purpose of assessments that were meant to be formative.

Numerous studies confirm that assessments of low instructional utility do more harm than good. Assessments, when misaligned, distort instruction, exacerbate inequities, and demoralize educators.

Even in more subtle settings, assessment design matters: when assessments test content not central to core instruction, they lead instruction astray. Assessments aren't neutral – their consequences are real.

This penalizes students for what they don't know, rather than guiding them on a path to learning it.

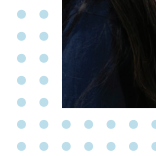
The result is a system that holds back the very students it was designed to help.

Our partners at Children's Aid put it best:

“By uniting high-quality curriculum with aligned, formative assessment, and by fostering a culture of care and high expectations, we are not just raising test scores. We are preparing students to thrive in high school, college, and life.”

—Dr. Robin Fleshman, middle school principal, Children's Aid

We've all seen the importance of high-quality instructional **materials**. ANet's data affirms the next critical step: pairing those materials with high-quality instructional **assessments**.



THE SOLUTION:

High-Quality Instructional Assessments (HQIA)

To move from a system of conflict to one of coherence, we looked to the evidence. Our analysis of student summative assessment performance and educator behaviors revealed a simple but urgent truth: teachers didn't need more data, they needed clarity on misconceptions and immediate ways to address them through their curriculum.

The answer is a new class of assessments that we call High-Quality Instructional Assessments (HQIA), **linking** curriculum, instruction and assessments.

Designed to fuel instruction, not report on it, HQIA close the crucial gap between what we ask teachers to teach and what we give them to measure.

HQIA thoughtfully guide teaching and learning. These assessments:

1. **Provide Instructional Utility** by providing actionable insights into student learning
2. **Maintain Curricular Integrity**, empowering teachers to leverage their materials to respond to student needs
3. **Facilitate Data-Driven Continuity** from the classroom all the way through the district level leadership by aggregating instructional insights



Teachers finally get instructional utility from data that matters.

Traditional assessments only provide a single, static score.

With HQIA, for the first time, teachers can see the story behind a student's score – uncovering the specific logic or misconception in each student's thinking.

HQIA connect high-quality instructional materials to the reality of student learning, so teachers can confidently refine their practice.*

This means a necessary, **definitive shift from noisy data to meaningful understanding.**

*We noted performance in ELA was stronger when using high-quality assessments and curriculum together but it had less impact than in math. Our hypothesis is that these smaller gains reflect a gap in the assessment tools available. While they have many hallmarks of HQIA, no literacy assessments offered had the instructional utility needed to help teachers target students' comprehension needs.





GREATER GAINS WITH HQIA

ANet’s recent partnership with a Florida school district is a powerful proof point: By illuminating misconceptions, HQIA empower teachers to proactively adapt instruction.

We know from decades of research that many student misconceptions are predictable and hold back student progress. We designed a partnership that directly connected HQIM, assessments and professional learning:

- All teachers received professional development on the common misconceptions revealed by an analysis of years of ANet’s HQIA data.
- One group of teachers received an additional session focused on an essential next step: *directly connecting HQIA insights and their high-quality instructional materials, showing teachers how they could use their HQIM to prevent misconceptions.*

The impact?

Students taught by the group of teachers who received the targeted support session outperformed their peers by as much as 14% on assessment items. That session successfully equipped teachers not just to *identify* a misconception, but how to *dismantle* that misconception using their high-quality materials.

The lesson is undeniable. **When HQIA tie assessment data to instructional action, students succeed.**

“[This additional session] made me think about how I’m saying something versus how they need to learn it. When you’re going through the process, you realize you’re probably creating misconceptions yourself because of how you’re asking them a question or how you’re presenting the math.”

—Teacher trained in this partnership





HQIA deliver the *curriculum-aligned instructional insights that make a difference.*

While the curriculum space has significantly improved, most assessments haven't kept pace, leaving a gap of misalignment. HQIA close that gap by delivering data directly tied to the curriculum teachers are already using. The feedback is more instructionally relevant. Teachers get insights to how their instruction is going in minutes, not months, empowering them to make timely adjustments.

Even the best curriculum might fail if teachers can't see how it's supporting student learning in real time. When leaders ask, "*Why is our curriculum not working?*" the answer is often a lack of aligned assessment data.

Teachers don't reject curriculum; they improvise because they're unsupported.

HQIA fix that. Students are tested to see how well they understand the problem in front of them, not just how well they memorized the methods in the materials. By uncovering both mastery and misconceptions, **educators gain a guide for supporting *all* students across *all* tiers with targeted support.**

THE HQIM + HQIA MODEL WORKS.

Schools using HQIM and aligned assessments drove **7% higher gains in Math and 2% in English Language Arts**, outperforming their peers.

With HQIA, teachers reclaim their focus and time.

HQIA equip educators and leaders with actionable insight across classrooms, schools, and districts. Instead of scattered data points, HQIA provide an aggregated view of student thinking and progress.

HQIA improve student outcomes by:

- Accelerating instructional supports like coaching and planning for targeted priorities
- Turning classroom evidence into system-level insight – guiding teachers' next moves, informing professional learning, and helping leaders make data-driven decisions that improve instruction at scale



Districts can ensure curriculum investment pays off.

When assessments are truly aligned to high-quality instructional materials, leaders gain a clear picture of what's working and what's not. **HQIA make it possible to see how curriculum is being implemented, where instruction is breaking down, and where support is needed most.**

Instead of compliance reports, leaders get actionable insight they can use to strengthen teaching, direct professional learning, and allocate resources wisely. That's how curriculum investments translate into real student growth. **These assessment solutions provide the clear connections leaders have been looking for - the full picture between what teachers are teaching and what students are learning.**

Regardless of the stated purpose of the assessment (growth, diagnostic, interim etc.), HQIA prove to be the most significant indicator of instructional success.



CLASSROOM COHERENCE THROUGH HQIA

Integrating HQIM for Better Student Outcomes

One longtime ANet partner in Renton, Washington already leveraged our interim assessments to address a variety of their needs.

When they integrated HQIM and aligned it to assessments, the impact was substantial.

In just one year, student proficiency in math jumped 12.7%, reaching 80% average proficiency across the school.⁹

Adopting Aligned Assessments to Existing HQIM

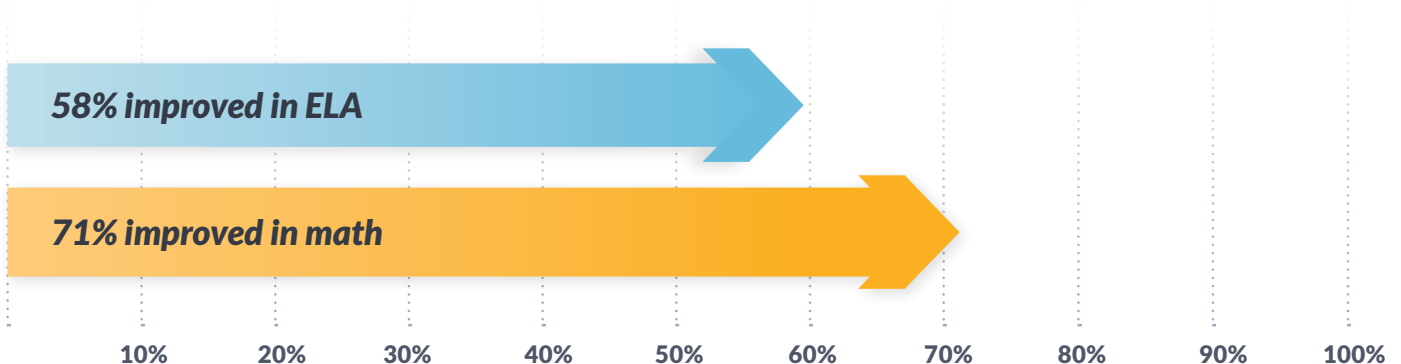
Another partner in Renton, Washington started their HQIA journey from the opposite position: they already had a strong math curriculum in place.

Then, teachers voted to adopt ANet's interim assessments to fix the *Missing Link*.

This contributed to a 3.91% increase in math proficiency after just one year and enabled them to outperform their matched peers.¹⁰ (Think of **matched peers** as a cohort of schools that have a comparable demographic and starting point.)¹¹

Whether a district begins with a strong curriculum or strong assessments, the outcome is the same: **pairing HQIA with HQIM empower teachers and accelerate student learning.**

At a time when we're seeing historic lows in student scores across the country, ANet partners made positive gains:¹²



CONNECTING THE *MISSING LINK*: Children's Aid College Prep School Case Study

The Challenge

We began our partnership with Children's Aid in the 2019-2020 school year. Originally, Children's Aid was looking for an assessment partner to help strengthen their use of student data. As we began that work together and unpacked where they were with instruction, we found that their existing curriculum wasn't strong enough to meet their ambitious student achievement goals.





Our Solution

We set a multi-year implementation plan focused on improving student outcomes, supported by a strategy where curriculum, assessment, and instruction would all work together in support of student learning. It included:

New curricula (HQIM). We realized that HQIM was the area of need, supported by the instructional use of ANet’s interims. We identified new HQIM, and strengthened both literacy and math instruction.

Teacher professional development, buy-in, and support. Then, ANet coaches worked closely with the team to set up an intentional system to support:

Teachers and students as they began teaching and learning using the HQIM.



Leaders as they started using HQIA – ensuring teachers had the right data at the right time to help students learn, without spending hours analyzing outdated, murky assessment scores.

*“We worked to develop a professional development and professional learning culture around **using the data and curriculum together**. That was our partnership with ANet.”*

–Dr. Robin Fleshman, principal, Children’s Aid



By design, this is an ongoing process. School leaders ensure that teachers have plenty of professional development, support, and time to implement their HQIM and HQIA, cohesively.

Co-planning. Teachers and leaders co-plan how they’ll use HQIM every week. They look at student materials – and data – together. This time for intellectual prep is highly valued by all. The teams tie classroom observations directly to planning outcomes.

“We plan together as a team. We discuss the questions, the anticipated responses, the misconceptions. Though we deliver differently, we are all on the same page at the same time.”

–Lydia Gordon, third grade teacher, Children’s Aid

Compatible assessments. Leaders at Children’s Aid recognized that a great curriculum is only powerful if you can see how it works in real time – with coherent assessment data. In our partnership, pairing HQIM with HQIA wasn’t an add-on. It was the way to truly activate their materials and give teachers the insights they needed to help students grow.

With ANet’s help, the team provided consistent, intentional leadership focused on aligning curriculum and formative assessment.



Educators now analyze HQIA data regularly. When they do, they share results with students, fast.



By comparing curriculum to assessment results, teachers easily identify supplemental resources and practice materials to help students learn.

The team developed an intentional, purposeful system for the use of instructional assessments to drive use of curriculum.

Student engagement. Teachers work with students to set their learning goals and create a plan for how students will learn concepts in upcoming units and overcome misconceptions. As a result, students often feel motivated and excited to conquer that next assessment. Students learn not only from instruction, but also from timely feedback on their assessments and tasks. They understand that assessments are a way to help them succeed.

Assessments inform instruction. Teachers use assessment previews while planning their next lessons. The previews help them personalize lessons to maximize engagement, support some students to catch up faster, and ensure all students learn concepts quickly.



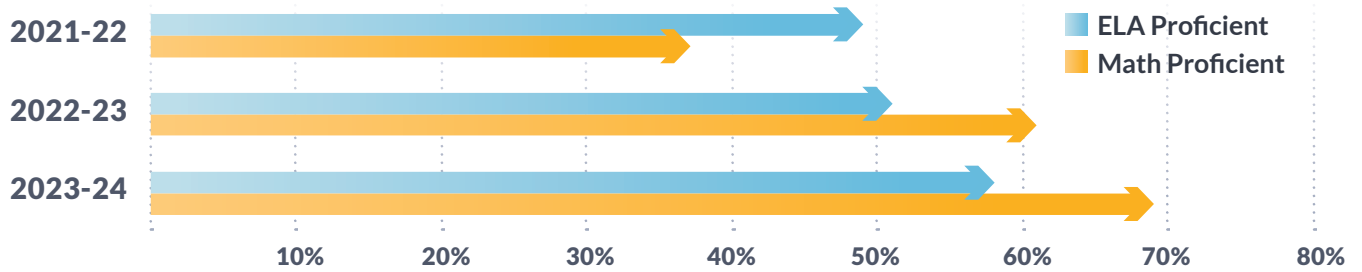
“The most important driver of our proficiency gains has been [our] unwavering focus on coupling HQ instructional materials with real time actionable data through ANet interims.”

–Dr. Robin Fleshman, principal, Children’s Aid

The Results

In addition to major growth in both Math and ELA proficiency, 100% of 8th graders taking the New York State Regents Algebra 1 Assessment passed.

Summative Data¹³

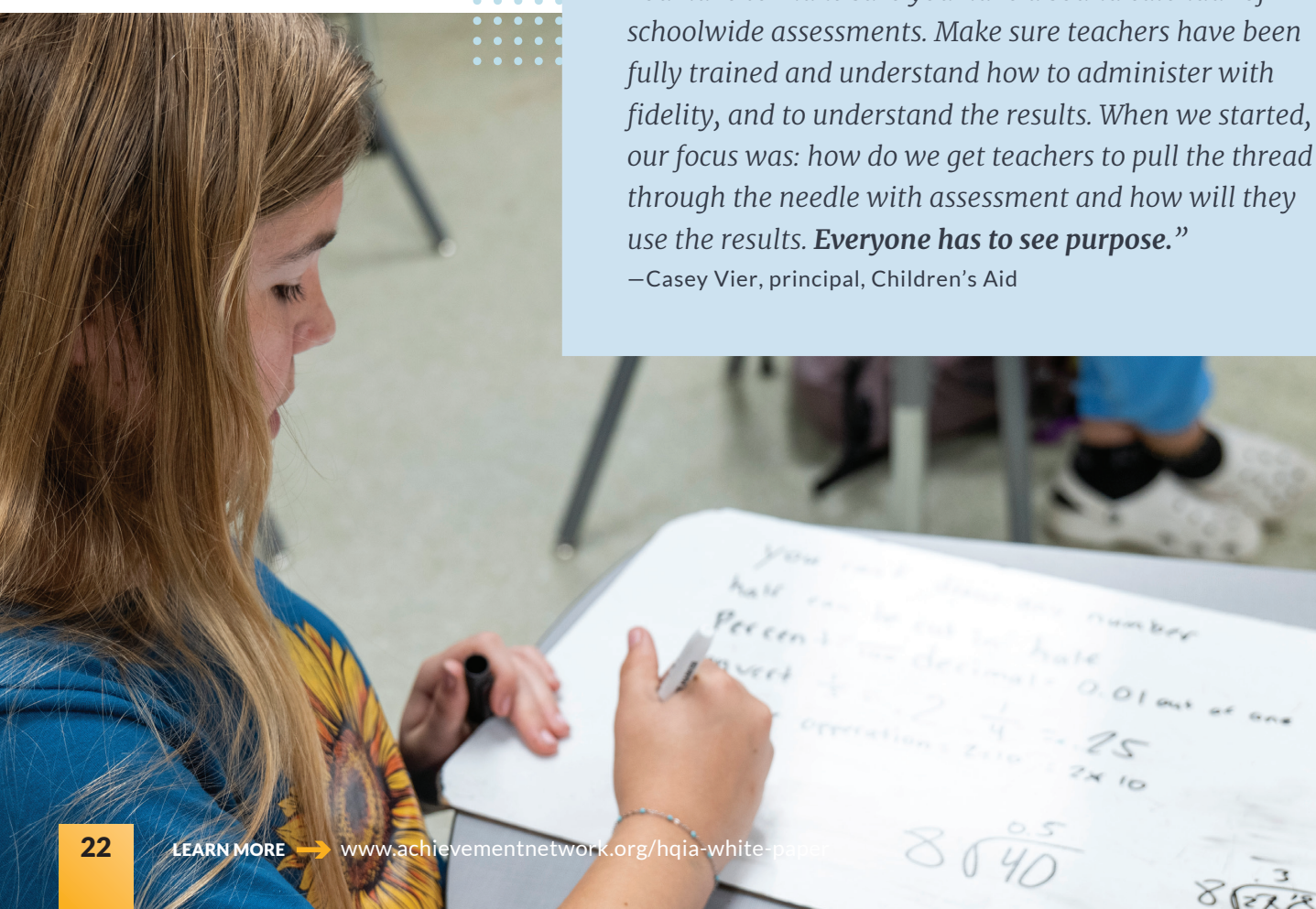


And we're not stopping there – we're continuing to work together to implement new best practices and serve students better.

“You can’t drive instruction without assessment.

*You have to make sure you have a sound calendar of schoolwide assessments. Make sure teachers have been fully trained and understand how to administer with fidelity, and to understand the results. When we started, our focus was: how do we get teachers to pull the thread through the needle with assessment and how will they use the results. **Everyone has to see purpose.**”*

—Casey Vier, principal, Children’s Aid



From Problem to Possibility: District Leaders Hold the Key

For every student like Alex who finds a path forward, we lose thousands more in the gap between what we teach and what we test. This *Missing Link* isn't abstract. It's a solvable problem that plays out daily in classrooms across the nation.

Next Steps to Drive HQIA:

1. **Start with coherence.** Convene your curriculum, assessment, and professional learning teams to align around a single vision. HQIA only works when assessments reinforce curriculum goals and professional learning equips teachers to act on the insights.
2. **Anchor assessments in curriculum.** Audit current assessments to ensure they align directly with your district's high-quality instructional materials. Prioritize coherence—not more tests.
3. **Demand instructional utility from your data.** Choose or design assessments that don't just report scores, but reveal misconceptions and next instructional moves. Data should guide, not distract.
4. **Invest in data fluency.** Support teachers and principals in making sense of assessment insights. Provide professional learning that connects data directly to instructional decisions.
5. **Monitor curriculum implementation through HQIA.** Use assessment results to see where your HQIM is working, where instruction is breaking down, and where targeted support is needed.

The decisions you make about coherence today will shape whether thousands more students are left behind — or set on a path to success. **HQIA is not just another tool.** It's the lever for aligning curriculum, professional learning, and assessment so every student benefits.

Continue the Conversation?

Subscribe to our newsletter: over the next few months we will continue sharing case studies, resources and best practices on how schools and educators are leveraging HQIA.



www.achievementnetwork.org/subscribe

Read the HQIA Blog to help ensure you have effective assessments for students.



www.achievementnetwork.org/resource-center/what-are-hqia

SOURCES

1. Simba PK12 Testing Market Report. (2019).
2. Tosh, K., Herman, P., & D'Brot, A. (2020). *Digital instructional materials: What are teachers using and what barriers exist? Insights from the American Education Panels*. RAND Corporation.
3. The Achievement Network. (2025). Internal partner data.
4. Hart, R., et al. (2015). *Student testing in America's great city schools: An inventory and preliminary analysis*. Council of the Great City Schools.
5. Center for Education Policy Research. (2020). *Does studying student data really raise test scores?* Harvard University.
6. Sparks, S. D. (2023). *Teachers say those ubiquitous, every-few-months tests don't always capture what's taught*. Education Week. Retrieved September 16, 2025, from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-say-those-ubiquitous-every-few-months-tests-don-t-always-capture-what-s-taught/2023/04>
7. The Achievement Network. (2025, February 24). *The power of misconceptions in instruction*. Achievement Network. <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/resource-center/misconceptions>
8. The Achievement Network. (n.d.). *Fewer, better assessments: How assessments can be used for instruction*. Achievement Network. <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/resource-center/the-assessment-problem>
9. Educators for Excellence. (2023). *Voices from the Classroom 2023: A Survey of America's Educators*.
10. The Achievement Network. (2025). Internal data.
11. The Achievement Network. (2025). *Our approach to change*. Retrieved September 16, 2025, from <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/results>
12. The Achievement Network. (2025). Internal data.
13. The Achievement Network. (2025). Internal data.

