

A Behind-the-Scene look at DEFINING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The room is hushed. Educators, administrators, and curriculum specialists from districts across Idaho sit in anticipation and listen intently as facilitators from Data Recognition Corporation (DRC) explain the purpose of drafting Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) for the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) for Grades 3–10. Some participants appear curious and wonder why they were chosen for such an important task. Others are apprehensive, yet all are engaged in the presentation. During the training they begin to understand that the development of PLDs for the ISAT is a critical component of the statewide assessment system. They also come to appreciate the amount of work involved in creating assessments that truly measure student performance.

DRC provides the participants with a solid foundation on which to build the PLDs for Idaho. Training includes an in-depth study of Idaho State Standards and the distribution of material to provide an overview of PLD development. Participants learn that PLDs paint a picture of student performance, and serve as guiding principles that identify what students in Idaho should know and be able to do at each grade level. PLDs describe student performance for each state content standard. More importantly, PLDs serve as the bridge that connects skills and competencies at one grade level to those at the next grade level to ensure continuity of instruction for scope and sequence across all of the grade levels. PLDs provide the connection between the standard assessed, the instruction provided, and the learning expectations for students.

Participants are afforded ample time to ask questions before they are assigned to small groups for content-specific work sessions. The purpose of the small-group session is three-fold. First, participants study the Idaho State Standards, emphasizing the commonalities across grade levels and the differences between the skills expected at each grade level. Next, DRC facilitators present several versions and

formats of PLDs to expose the participants to a variety of PLD constructions and language samples so they can draw their own conclusions about how PLDs for Idaho should be written. Finally, participants begin to write drafts of the PLDs.

The hum of conversation and the murmur of discussion provide a backdrop as the small content-specific work groups grapple with each word; they strive to determine which approach and style is best for Idaho PLDs. In each room, the small group of participants work together and then subdivide into two groups to refine the drafts of the PLDs. They work concurrently on the same task—establishing the proficient-level description of the PLD. This division ensures diversity and consistency of thought. The belief is that if two concurrent work groups develop descriptors separately and are reunited to form consensus, then a stronger alignment with the state standard occurs and a true reflection of student performance is realized.

Once consensus is achieved, the actual writing of the PLDs begins. One participant, B.J. Ricks, observes that at first the members of the small groups were “miles apart” in their thinking, but as they explained their points of view to each other, they realized that they were actually “more alike” than they were different. Ricks reflects, “...this process gave us a better understanding of the state standards and how they applied not only to our students, but to each student in the state of Idaho. I believe that as a result of this experience each of us became better teachers.”

An important step in the PLD development is describing the performance continuums. Participants analyze the skills required for a specific task in order to identify performance criteria upon which to judge student achievement. The first PLD tackled is the level for Proficient for a middle grade. This task requires a full understanding of the fundamental principles underlying what is to be taught. This activity is a true learning experience

for the participants because it requires each member of the committee to analyze the curriculum content standard, define specific student skills necessary to meet that standard, and then, in clear measurable terms and concise language, describe expected student performance. After participants determine the language for the level for Proficient for a middle grade, participants create PLDs for the adjacent grades, always working from the midpoint to one grade level above and one grade level below. This alternating scaffold-like technique ensures a thread of continuity from one grade level to the next. After the full continuum from Grades 3–10 is complete, participants often experience an epiphany of understanding. Typically, several report that they will take what they have learned back to their districts to share and to train their peers. In a letter received by DRC after the training, one teacher comments that teachers in her district had been overwhelmed with testing and accountability, but as she explained the PLD process to them they “...became more convinced that testing is a necessary part of the educational process.”

Nancy Nead, a teacher in Teton School District #401, shared that she had no idea of the work involved in writing the PLDs. She “really hadn’t paid much attention to the descriptors,” and she believes this to be true of most teachers and parents. When she returned to Driggs, Idaho, she was asked to give a presentation to the teachers at her school. Impressed with what Ms. Nead had learned and with the information she had shared, district administrators requested that she present at a district-wide inservice the following Friday. Humbled by the request, Nancy felt that her participation was “valuable to the district” and said, “After learning what I did at this conference, I definitely will change the way I teach from now on.”