

# Families' and Caregivers' Role in Formative Assessment

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This is so important for community building and student success. How do we engage cross-agency to support this?

~ **ADE Formative Assessment Working Group**

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## A Picture of Practice

In an educational system based on formative assessment principles, families and caregivers are partners in their students' daily assessment of learning. They contribute input and knowledge about what their students know and can do, as well as provide background information about their home lives to support new learning. This partnership enables school staff to better understand the status of student learning, where families are coming from, and what they value. It also informs teachers' communication modes, instruction, and next steps.

This partnership includes caregivers, parents, siblings, and other extended family members so that all can collectively contribute knowledge and receive input about students' learning and development. This inclusive lens is especially important in homes where parents may be unable to take as active of a role as they would like in their students' learning. It also supports building a community at home to support students' education, enabling families and caregivers to contribute through sharing local resources and experiences. For this partnership to flourish, teachers and leaders attend to creating trusting relationships with caregivers, which serves as an entry point for engagement.

To participate in this way, families and caregivers need a variety of opportunities to access information about their student's learning and provide feedback. Since this "sharing of information relies on a shared understanding of the purposes for learning ... and the roles each participant is expected to play",<sup>1</sup> teachers and leaders help families and caregivers understand what students are learning, why they are learning it, and what progress looks like. They also

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<sup>1</sup> Cowie, B. & Mitchell, L. (2015). Equity as family/whānau opportunities for participation in formative assessment. *Assessment Matters*. 8, 119–141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18296/am.0007>

communicate about what their role is in supporting students to advance. Families and caregivers can then engage their students in meaningful dialogue and share interpretations and ideas with students to cultivate their understanding. This also creates space for student reflection, self-assessment, and building learner agency.

## How Does the Family and Caregiver Role Shift?

Shifting the family and caregiver role in this way is to engage more deeply in family–school partnerships for the benefit of students. School practices can expand beyond simply communicating plans, expectations, and experiences to caregivers to more inclusively implement systems and processes by which families can engage with the school in designing, implementing, and evaluating instructional plans and student development. This engagement facilitates school accountability and provides a pathway for families to have meaningful conversations with their students about learning (e.g., including through student-led conferences).

## How Does This Shift Support Learning for All Students?

This shift helps families and caregivers understand “the why” of the intended learning, what the process of learning looks like, and what to expect when students reach their learning goals. Caregiver input about their student’s learning supports school staff to also understand where students and their families are coming from and what works for them. This approach communicates that “we are all on the same team, and we all want and expect the best for students.”

Seeking and incorporating family contributions informs and defines what is valued and the roles of school system personnel, families, and students. Including families' diverse perspectives and knowledge helps shape understandings and expectations. This, in turn, supports access and equal opportunities for families and students.

## How Does a Home Grounded in Formative Assessment Look and Sound?

**You would see** caregivers act as partners in the formative assessment process by paying attention to and responding to students’ expressions of learning. They would provide feedback that supports students to take next steps and deepen their curiosity. Families and caregivers would share with educators what they notice about their student’s learning and provide context. They would also share how their student learns best, how they are comfortable communicating, and the ways in which they prefer to demonstrate what they have learned.

**You would hear** families and caregivers use common language grounded in formative assessment principles to focus students’ efforts. They would reflect with their student by asking what they have learned, where they are in their learning, and about the next steps.

## Family and Caregiver Success Criteria

- Engage with staff at school events to learn about formative assessment principles and practices.
- Reflect with their student, asking what they have learned, where they are in their learning, and what the next steps are.
- Share with educators what they notice about their student's current learning and provide context.
- Advocate for their student and be empowered to take on roles on campus and in classrooms.

## Discussion Questions

- What support would the field need in order to build and maintain this partnership systemically?
- What is each group's role in supporting this partnership with families and caregivers?