Site Leaders' Role in Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is a general approach of using evidence while learning is underway and a culture that repositions who is responsible for the learning. … Every one of us is responsible for leading some level of this work.

~ ADE Formative Assessment Working Group

A Picture of Practice

Site leaders in a formative assessment system are lead learners, developing formative assessment knowledge alongside their staff. They communicate a vision to teachers, students, and families describing why this work is essential, including clear and consistent messaging that connects formative assessment and enhanced student agency and achievement. Site leaders are committed to developing their own deep understanding of formative assessment principles and practices and then using this knowledge to develop staff expertise. They support others by engaging in observation and feedback, tailoring professional development to the needs of teachers and other educators, and removing implementation barriers (e.g., conflicting schedules, divergent expectations, differing program requirements). Site leaders create leadership teams to support their staff in doing this work, beginning with defining the student role in learning. They model transparency in their own learning journey, from emergent to mature understanding of formative assessment. They eschew being a "lone hero" who has all the answers but commit instead to building relationships that lead to collective responsibility and action. Site leaders support formative assessment by fostering a learning culture that honors authenticity in learning and personal and collective accountability.

How Does the Site Leader Role Shift?

Shifting the site leader role models best practices, facilitates a shift in educators' practices, and, ultimately, shifts students' learning dynamics. They create opportunities for all learners to be thought partners, reflectors, and knowledge producers, enabling continuous improvement in teaching and learning for entire school communities. Through these efforts, site leaders change their schools' cultures so that formative assessment practices are adopted and implemented at all levels.

How Does This Shift Support Learning for All Students?

This shift in site leadership practices empowers teachers to make evidence-based instructional decisions, equipping them to make informed teaching decisions. When site leaders, teachers, and students build their capacity to lead the learning, they create meaningful relationships, increase their own agency, and build collective efficacy. They rely less on standardized practices and solutions and, instead, adapt practices based on identified learning needs. By centering distributed leadership and respecting diverse voices, students can get what they need when they need it.

How Does a School Grounded in Formative Assessment Look and Sound?

You would see site leaders creating the time and space for teachers to learn, practice, and implement formative assessment practices. There would be evidence of shared learning and collaboration during professional development sessions where teachers and site leaders could be seen problem-solving and planning together based on evidence of student learning. Formative conversations would be on view between site leaders and teachers in hallways and staff rooms, and the vision for the work would be communicated through bulletin boards and other visual means throughout the school. Site leaders would support the creation of data walls that show student strengths instead of weaknesses and include student input.

You would hear site leaders engaged in asset-based conversations about student learning. Teams would work collaboratively, building on each other's knowledge as they participate in leadership opportunities. It would sound like decisions being shared with others and rationales given based on evidence of student learning from a variety of formative sources. Site leaders would be heard speaking the same formative assessment language as others, sharing their learning journeys, and focusing on their student-centered communities.

Site Leader Success Criteria

- Provide a systems-level perspective by creating the time, resources, and funding for formative assessment to be understood and practiced by all.
- Promote collective responsibility and ownership for everyone at the school (i.e., staff, students, and families).
- Share a vision and common language for what it means to implement formative assessment practices.
- Create a culture of collaborative inquiry and reflection as a learner among learners.

Discussion Questions

- Who needs to be at the table to plan teaching, learning, and assessment to support all students to achieve?
- How can you shift systems to allow for more time for teachers to meaningfully get to know students and families?

- How can you individualize formative assessment for people with different roles, requirements, and responsibilities?
- How do you communicate about and advocate for your unique learners?