

Leading Formative Assessment in Dallas: Toward Student Agency and Academic Achievement

Many visitors to Ben Milam Elementary School in Dallas, Texas, have come away deeply impressed by how students are engaging in the learning process. District and school leaders who visited in fall 2019 saw students across different classrooms realizing the benefits of formative assessment. Whether clustered in reading groups, solving math problems, or giving feedback to one another in small groups, each student focused on directing their own individual learning.

Observers also noted something else unique: Teachers were not standing in front of classes and directing students. Rather, they were circulating, checking in on student groups, and conferring with individuals. The visitors reporting noticing that student and teacher roles were dramatically different from the norm at other campuses. In particular, at Ben Milam they observed the power of all students to:

- Leverage peer knowledge and experience to advance their own understanding
- Know what they are learning and have a clear sense of how to take next steps to move their learning forward
- Stay engaged, focused, and confident about their role as learners

These are characteristics of a strong formative assessment culture. As a result, Ben Milam was selected as a demonstration site for formative assessment practices after a district leader visited last year and decided that others should have a chance to see what the school's teachers were doing. Since then, Ben Milam has welcomed a lot of visitors. It has also continued to embody a learning culture that supports effective implementation of formative assessment, as both students and adults learn from evidence, from each other, and even from the visitors.

Drawing on a WestEd-led evaluation and on others' observations, this article explores how Ben Milam's learning culture has developed around formative assessment. It describes the school's efforts to develop formative assessment practices, including its principal and teachers embracing a professional learning stance that provides a fertile context for promoting student learning and developing the dispositions and skills to learn how to learn.

A Culture of Learning, With Students at the Center

Ben Milam’s principal, Anna Galvan, has supported teachers and students to take on formative assessment practices aimed at greater equity and learning. Along the way, she has heard many misconceptions about formative assessment. “Formative assessment is often misunderstood as more frequent or ‘shorter-cycle’ assessments, with the teacher still in charge of monitoring and evaluating students,” says Galvan. But she and her faculty learned early on that formative assessment has the power to advance achievement *only when students come to see themselves as responsible for, and agents of, their own learning.*

The school’s formative assessment practices focus on providing ways to make students’ current knowledge and understanding visible (e.g., through what they say, do, make, or write). As such, formative assessment is defined not by a particular tool or practice but more by a general approach of using evidence while learning is underway and a culture that repositions who is responsible for the learning. In this way, formative assessment emphasizes involving students as partners; eliciting, interpreting, and responding to evidence of student learning throughout a lesson; and creating routines for students to gain knowledge from one another as well as from the teacher.

Ben Milam’s formative assessment efforts can be traced back about four years to when a group of the school’s teachers and leaders began a critical shift toward an equity focus, a shift that began after the district redrew attendance boundaries in 2016, dramatically changing the school’s demographics. The redrawn boundaries meant Ben Milam now had students from other urban neighborhoods, leading to an increase in the percentage of low-income families and inclusion of a downtown homeless shelter, with the latter resulting in the school’s mobility rates rising over the last three years from 9 percent to more than 25 percent.

In response, the school began an inquiry process to identify new approaches to supporting all of its students and families. Ben Milam’s leaders decided to introduce new policies (e.g., identifying ways for families to stay in the school even if they move to another neighborhood in the city), improve models to deepen parent and community engagement (e.g., holding Parent-Teacher Organization meetings at the homeless shelter), and establish new ways to support students’ transition into the school environment.

All these efforts, beyond their practical impacts, changed the school culture, including in the classrooms. They supported one of the prerequisite contexts for effective formative assessment: a trusting and respectful learning environment that challenges and pushes forward ways of working for both adults and students.

The school's inquiry process also was a sort of model for what teachers and students do with formative assessment in the classroom: an iterative process of noticing and sensemaking. And the resulting schoolwide changes supported all students to feel a part of the school community and ultimately adopt the learner identities needed to act with agency within a formative assessment context. Students' identities as learners is a key to formative assessment.

In this context, when the opportunity became available three years ago to participate in a formative assessment pilot, the How I Know project, funded by the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, Ben Milam school leaders and faculty dove in. Formative assessment became a key strategy to help teachers meet all students where they are and to support students as they move toward the next level in their learning, and in this way support equity.

Leading Learning

Galvan, the school's principal, understood that for the school to be successful implementing new practices, she would have to immerse herself in learning about formative assessment. During the early stages, expectations about how teachers would apply formative assessment practices were not always clear, teachers worried that they weren't doing things right, and it was difficult when Galvan could not provide adequate feedback to teachers. In her words:

I would say that we were all struggling together at some points, and that they were looking to me for answers. I didn't have them at that particular moment. I couldn't help them, and that caused frustration.

This frustration further compelled Galvan to take on the role of learner in order to better support her teachers. She immersed herself in the How I Know project Design Team, a leadership group tasked with guiding formative assessment implementation in the district. She completed "leadership walks," visiting classrooms alongside project coaches, and participated in all district and school learning opportunities. In addition, she learned alongside Ben Milam's pilot teachers by regularly visiting the five classes in her school that were the first to implement formative assessment through the How I Know project.

A critical moment in her own learning came through interacting with a WestEd coach who helped her use a set of formative assessment observation rubrics as a tool to identify changes in teacher practice. Exploring current practice and how it aligns with the rubrics became a grounding task that allowed both Galvan and her teachers to collectively explore emerging expertise and insights.

Galvan found that using rubrics opened the door for shared exploration and learning, so that she and teachers learned together. "Once I got more proficient using the [rubrics] to identify evidence of formative assessment practices, I was able to have conversations with teachers

that pushed their learning further. We looked at evidence and then we studied the rubric to guide next steps,” she said. The combination of frequent classroom visits with ongoing evidence of evolving classroom practices supported both Galvan and her teachers to lead the process of learning about formative assessment.

Over time, additional learning structures and norms were established to support the kind of teacher-led analysis of instructional practices needed to advance formative assessment implementation. Galvan worked with her district leadership team and with WestEd formative assessment coaches, whom the district had hired to support professional learning and introduce site-based teacher learning that included daily teacher inquiry and reflection.

A primary finding from the [How I Know project evaluation](#) was that, over the two years of the project, teacher use of formative assessment was stronger when they learned through experiences such as engaging with new content and participating in peer observations, classroom coaching, and site-based professional learning communities (PLCs). At Ben Milam, teachers engaged with new content online and participated in structured peer observations and feedback cycles, which offered ways for them to make sense of current student learning and use that information to deepen collaborative reflection, feedback, and inquiry.

Modeling a Learning Culture

When Galvan started visiting classrooms to learn about formative assessment, teachers worried about being evaluated, wondering about the negative impact of doing things “wrong.” Over time, the principal’s classroom visits became a way to highlight and share the growing expertise of teachers and students, as formative assessment practices were made more explicit and transferrable. In this culture, teachers came to value collaboration as a way to develop collective expertise, share insights, and do joint work.

Galvan has modeled a culture of learning through her own continuous inquiry, analysis of current evidence, and collaborative exploration alongside teachers. In the culture she has helped establish at the school, teachers demonstrate learner agency in ways that mirror how students learn through formative assessment. Teachers themselves engage in inquiry, set learning goals, look at daily evidence of learning, and, through collaborative inquiry and peer dialogue, they consider how to advance their learning.

As the school works to scale up formative assessment from the original pilot classrooms to being a schoolwide commitment, Galvan describes her idea of collective accountability, “every one of us is responsible for leading some level of this work.”

A tangible result has been an increase in student test scores. This past year, Ben Milam posted significant gains in all aspects of its state assessment results, with notable improvement for all

subgroups. In particular, the school had a 33-percentage point gain in the “closing the gap” category of the state’s accountability system. The improvements earned the school its first-ever “A” rating for academics from the state of Texas.

Galvan, who has also been working closely with the district to explore sharing what Ben Milam has learned and increasing the use of formative assessment across other schools in Dallas, mentions:

I did receive a personalized email from our Deputy Chief of School Leadership, Jolee Healey, congratulating me on growth. And so I turned around and congratulated the teachers, who turned around and congratulated the students, because it was all of us. It is all of us being excited about this work and seeing that it really does make a difference.

Perhaps the most important differences are conveyed not merely in test scores but by indications of how deeply the school is building a learning culture. One example Galvan describes is from a recent classroom visit during which she was videotaping student dialog to capture some of the positive shifts in the student role. The teacher approached Galvan, and the two decided on the spot to review the video together. Later, the teacher invited peers to review it as well, resulting in an impromptu “video study” with a half dozen educators exploring how students were becoming more active learners.

Such spontaneous moments of sharing, embodying the spirit of ongoing reflection and improvement, tend to be extremely rare in schools but can be vitally important. As Galvan says “I try to capture those moments, that are not necessarily planned, and are going to be the strong examples that will push our work forward.”