

Lessons Learned About Leading the Implementation of Formative Assessment

A Framework for School Leaders and Leadership Teams

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Ensuring that students *learn how to learn* (James et al., 2007) is more critical than ever for their success in life and work in the fast-changing 21st century. But doing so requires a significant shift in teaching and learning practices, away from a traditional “teacher instructs students” approach.

Consistent with contemporary theories of learning — and with the drive to achieve greater equity in education — today’s classroom needs to reflect more collaborative learning practices, whereby students learn with one another and their teacher. In this classroom, the social process that can play a key role in enhancing learning is valued, with learning recognized as a shared endeavor and joint responsibility (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2011; Absolum, 2010; Black, et al., 2003). When teacher and student share responsibility for learning, students are no longer passive recipients of instruction. Instead, they become active agents in their own learning who are able to respond to feedback, set learning goals, create self-oriented feedback loops to monitor their progress toward the goals, and adapt their own learning strategies when they perceive it as necessary for meeting the goals.

For schools seeking to establish this kind of teaching and learning experience, formative assessment provides a clear path forward.

Formative assessment is the educational approach of engendering learning by having teacher and students alike assess students’ current knowledge and understanding — based on what students say, do,

make, or write — and then use that evidence to guide ongoing teaching and learning efforts. For teachers, this means listening, observing, questioning, and reviewing student work to make sense of where each student is in their own learning process and what is needed for each student to move forward, and then supporting all students to take the steps needed to advance their learning, steps that can vary by student. For students, formative assessment involves understanding daily learning goals, identifying how they will demonstrate that they have successfully met those goals, and engaging in classroom routines that involve getting feedback that will inform what needs to come next in their own learning. Many teachers who practice formative assessment report experiencing a change in the way they think about what it is to teach, from “delivering” a subject and “covering” the curriculum to considering how best to facilitate student learning (Black et al., 2003). Students in turn are seen as being responsible for, and prime agents of, their own learning. Reconfiguring traditional views of teachers’ and students’ roles alters relationships and transforms the culture of the classroom (Swaffield, 2008). Changes in classroom culture are required for formative assessment implementation (James et al., 2007) so that students and teachers are able to engage in making learning visible and in

using evidence of learning as a foundational practice for both teaching and learning.

Leaders' Role in Establishing Formative Assessment Practice

Research on efforts to bring about the instructional, cultural, and role shifts that are at the heart of formative assessment underscores the critical importance of having site leaders create the conditions needed for formative assessment to take root (Swaffield, 2016; Moss et al., 2013). Leaders create safe places for teachers to take risks and try new practices, they develop new models and approaches to support teacher learning, and they are learners themselves (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). They also use evidence to continuously assess how formative assessment efforts are progressing, and they hold out a vision for change. In keeping learning at the forefront — by asking teachers questions about how they are learning and keeping the conversation about learning alive each day — they begin to change the ways that teachers engage with their own learning and that of their students.

This brief provides a framework for how leaders can go about doing this.

The framework is based on learning from the How I Know project, which, between 2017 and 2020, supported three urban districts in their adoption of formative assessment. As a project partner, WestEd conducted site observations and leadership coaching at 12 school campuses in the three districts. To better understand the role of site leaders in guiding formative assessment implementation, WestEd's

team paid particular attention to, and documented, five leadership practices that appeared to enhance the implementation:

- » fostering understanding of formative assessment;
- » communicating a compelling vision for formative assessment that highlights expected changes it will bring about in the student role;
- » modeling a culture of learning in which adult learners, like student learners, use evidence from and get feedback on daily practice to guide their own learning;
- » leading site-based professional learning so that teachers can engage with new content and build shared capacity to implement formative assessment; and
- » nurturing the conditions necessary for the changes associated with implementing and scaling formative assessment.

These five practices operate synergistically to support and strengthen the learning and mindset shifts needed by teachers and their students if they are to successfully engage in formative assessment. Together, the practices serve as a framework (Exhibit 1) for leading the implementation of formative assessment. An overview of each practice is introduced below, with examples of the types of actions that leaders use to enact them.

Exhibit 1: Leading Formative Assessment: A Framework for School Leaders and Leadership Teams



Foster Understanding

Leaders understand and communicate what formative assessment practice is – and what it is not – so as to develop shared understanding of formative assessment practice.

To foster others' understanding of formative assessment, leaders themselves need to understand its grounding principles and be able to identify the instructional shifts that take place as teachers learn and advance their formative assessment practice. This requires having a deep knowledge of formative assessment – what it looks like in the classroom, how it differs from current instructional practice, how to distinguish it from “just good teaching,” and how to address persistent misinterpretations of formative assessment that can hinder its implementation. Further, leaders need to understand that developing formative assessment expertise requires teachers to create new instructional norms and routines while simultaneously examining their personal beliefs and

values about teaching and learning.

The need for extensive leadership support is due to the fact that teachers' implementation of this instructional process is not a simple matter of adhering to a prescribed set of activities. Rather, it requires teachers to internalize new principles that, in turn, influence how they adapt the technical aspects of their instruction (e.g., questioning and feedback routines, use of curriculum resources, design of daily learning tasks) and also inform their beliefs and values about teaching and learning. A range of teacher beliefs may influence formative assessment implementation. For example, their beliefs about their own role as content expert, the student role as consumer of information, or students' capacity to take ownership over their learning. Students and teachers both learn new ways of working as teachers promote new roles where learning takes place in partnership among learners in the classroom.

During implementation of the How I Know project, WestEd coaches observed that leaders who successfully fostered understanding of formative assessment

- » immersed themselves in learning about formative assessment;
- » developed a definition of formative assessment that served as an anchor for teachers as they tried formative assessment, discussed what they were learning about it, and explored how students were responding to new formative assessment practices;
- » identified and addressed misconceptions about formative assessment as they arose;
- » developed routines to visit classrooms, met with teachers, and noticed emerging formative assessment practices;

- » engaged in dialogue with teachers and provided feedback based on what students were doing in the classroom; and
- » validated teachers' understanding of changes in their role and in the students' role.

Communicate a Compelling Vision of How Formative Assessment Improves Learning

Leaders communicate a compelling vision for formative assessment that highlights expected changes in the student role and the teacher role.

The best indication of successful leadership is being able to mobilize people to direct their energy to action that will make things better. This requires gaining commitment from teachers, students, and parents, a commitment that can be seeded by a vision that convinces them that what is being asked of them is worth the effort it will take. In this case, a compelling vision of formative assessment — what it is, what it looks like in practice, and why it is important — provides stakeholders with motivation and clarity about how they can contribute to ambitious expectations for student learning.

Successful formative assessment practice is premised on everyone understanding how students best learn and how formative assessment will support students in attaining challenging learning goals. Yet within and across schools and districts, and across communities, there are often diverse viewpoints and misconceptions about student learning in general and about the conditions necessary for successful learning. Effective leaders craft and communicate a vision of how formative assessment can improve learning — one that outlines the value of this approach, including the powerful

changes in students' role and agency that it both elicits and supports. When the leader's vision becomes a shared vision community-wide, coherence and momentum around this work increase.

Depending on the community and existing school goals, a leader's vision may be framed in different ways. Leaders may focus on how formative assessment helps students develop metacognition, by becoming more aware of their learning and making conscious decisions about how to manage it (Zimmerman, 2002; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Or they may focus on how formative assessment helps students deepen disciplinary knowledge and further develop their identity as learners (Shepard et al., 2018). Leaders may also communicate the value of formative assessment for increasing students' motivation and feelings of self-efficacy, that is, beliefs in their abilities to carry out tasks (Schunk & Hanson, 1985). All such student outcomes contribute to supporting equity goals and serve students in their lives well beyond school.

During implementation of the How I Know project, WestEd coaches observed that leaders who successfully created and communicated a compelling vision of formative assessment

- » communicated how changes to the student role aligned with existing goals and initiatives at their site;
- » clarified what teachers would see more of, and less of, as students developed metacognition and agency;
- » prioritized formative assessment among the many expectations of the district and community;
- » “managed up” by meeting with their superiors to validate formative assessment as a core improvement strategy;

- » created and protected teachers' time and opportunity to learn and practice formative assessment and ensured that other expectations (e.g., grading practices, test prep, pacing guides) did not interfere with formative assessment learning;
- » visited classrooms to observe and talk with students in order to understand how they were engaging with formative assessment to support their learning; and
- » decided in advance of formative assessment implementation what other expectations could be negotiated so that formative assessment could move forward.

Model a Culture of Learning

Leaders model a culture for adult learning that mirrors how students learn through formative assessment.

In many schools, policies, expectations, and norms reflect a compliance mindset, which is distinctly different from that needed for teachers and students to engage effectively in formative assessment. Formative assessment requires a classroom culture that encourages students to take risks, show what they don't know, give and receive feedback, and learn from peers. These cultural norms are necessary if students are to shift from a focus on "getting it right" to a learning mindset, which is based on using evidence to guide and advance learning. As teachers learn how and begin to use formative assessment, they need to have the same sort of supportive culture. Thus, leading the implementation

of formative assessment requires leaders to model an adult learning culture that moves away from a tight focus on accountability to building norms that give permission and encourage teachers to identify what they don't yet know; and to evaluate classroom evidence and use it to inform their own learning and, therefore, their teaching. In this context, teachers exchange feedback with peers so as to move everyone's learning forward. By modeling the daily use of these norms, leaders enliven the learning culture, communicating that everyone — whether leader, teacher, or student — is a learner.

During implementation of the How I Know project, WestEd coaches observed that leaders who successfully modeled a learning culture that aligns with the principles of formative assessment

- » were transparent about their own learning related to formative assessment;
- » communicated that they were engaged in an inquiry process together with teachers and students in which everyone is a learner;
- » modeled for teachers and students that it is okay to communicate about and seek out any needed support during their own learning journey toward understanding formative assessment;
- » noticed and responded to emerging formative assessment practices, whether used by teachers or students; and
- » approached new learning and provided feedback on learning in ways that engender trust and reflect respect and empathy for learners.

Lead the Learning

Leaders establish professional learning opportunities that enable teachers to develop expertise in formative assessment through ongoing cycles of inquiry and reflection, which teachers can then model for their students.

If teachers are to learn and integrate daily instructional routines that include all aspects of formative assessment, they need to participate in learning opportunities themselves, in particular opportunities that encourage a reflective and adaptive stance toward their own instructional practice and that ground instructional practice in evidence of student learning. In other words, teachers must engage in ongoing and iterative learning driven by three questions: Where am I going? Where am I now? What should I learn next? Using this inquiry approach, teachers clarify their own goals, collect and interpret evidence that demonstrates how students are using formative assessment practices, and then consider next steps to advance their own practice based on that evidence.

To support this process, school leaders must establish opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning that includes the introduction of new content and practices and, also, ways for teachers to explore what these practices can look like in their own context. These practices might include new models of site-based, teacher-led learning that involve the use of current (i.e., today's or this week's) evidence of student learning, such as in-person or video-based peer observations using formative assessment protocols. Just as students need new resources and tools to effectively notice and use evidence to guide their learning, so too do teachers. Leaders must work with teachers to help them identify and consider evidence that speaks to how

their understanding and use of formative assessment is progressing; then the leader must support the teachers in using that information to guide their reflections and goal setting.

In the How I Know project, WestEd coaches observed that leaders who successfully led teacher learning

- » scheduled ongoing, structured opportunities for teachers to engage in learning and apply formative assessment;
- » supported daily learning through regular conversations and check-ins with teachers and students;
- » used current evidence of teacher and student learning to select professional learning that best supports next steps;
- » integrated teachers' learning of formative assessment into existing site-based learning structures (e.g., professional learning communities [PLCs]) and professional development plans to align professional learning goals;
- » created learning opportunities and structures, such as peer observation routines, review of model lessons, and video study, that encourage dialogue about the student role in learning;
- » supported teachers in establishing learning goals for themselves;
- » developed internal accountability to ensure that teachers were advancing their own learning; and
- » used a learning contract to ensure that educators understood and committed to the kind of professional learning required to conduct formative assessment.

Nurture the Conditions Necessary for Adaptive Change and for Scaling Formative Assessment

Leaders understand and apply theories of change to guide formative assessment implementation and to expand and deepen the use of formative assessment.

A core leadership competency (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014) involves having the knowledge and skills to lead complex change even in the face of messy, uncertain, or unclear conditions. That being said, some argue that it is these conditions themselves that provide the potential for creative breakthroughs: “The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without the accompanying messiness” (Fullan, 2001, p. 31). Effective change management requires leaders to have a range of models and strategies for guiding the change process. It also requires that they be tolerant of and open to the messiness likely to ensue, perhaps even welcoming it.

All leaders benefit from knowledge of models that describe how individuals experience change, how to manage building-level change, and how to spread or sustain change over time. When the change at hand is implementation of formative assessment, which is often adopted by beginning with a small number of teachers and then adding new teachers over several years, it’s likely that at any given time, groups of teachers will be at very different stages of their understanding of this instructional process. So, leaders must consider ways to navigate the different learning needs of individuals and schools. Understanding the research on stages of change,

or on effective implementation — Coburn’s Four Dimensions of Scale (2003), for example — can help leaders to regularly plan for and communicate project expectations for educators at different stages of their learning around shared capacity-building, development of deeper understanding, and formative practices.

During implementation of formative assessment, leaders also work to support change through ensuring that any building-level policies and practices that support or hinder the use of formative assessment are reviewed over time, as part of the ongoing initiative, with the intent of better aligning them with formative assessment practices and mindsets.

During the How I Know Project, WestEd coaches observed that leaders who nurtured the conditions to support change

- » learned and applied change management models to predict, notice, and respond to stages of individual and systems-level change;
- » communicated with teachers about their experiences of the change process;
- » aligned building-level policies and practices to reduce conflicting expectations and norms, particularly grading and reporting policies, or required assessment practices; and
- » supported efforts to revise or refine systems-level policies and practices that inhibit change in general or formative assessment specifically, such as teacher evaluation forms or professional learning practices.

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