ALN
ASSESSMENT LEARNING NETWORK

LEARNING POINT

What conditions are necessary for successful implementation of formative assessment?

The WestEd Formative Assessment Team has identified three essential conditions that are more likely to lead to successful implementation of formative assessment by teachers:

- Understanding formative assessment as a set of practices, grounded in disciplinary learning, rather than as a test event;
- Sustaining a long-term commitment to lead formative assessment implementation; and
- Establishing a culture, structures, and supports for ongoing professional learning for teachers, principals and district leaders.

Understanding formative assessment as a set of practices, grounded in disciplinary learning, rather than a test event

To reap the documented benefits of formative assessment, educators committed to successful implementation must understand that formative assessment is intended to inform learning during the course of its development, not to measure it or sum it up.

Formative assessment does not refer to a single test event, but rather to a set of interrelated practices that have been found to improve student learning. When learning to implement formative assessment, teachers may focus on the practices in isolation as they build their knowledge and skills. However, it is these practices, when used in combination, that render formative assessment such a powerful

engine for improving learning. Notably, formative assessment is not just for teachers; students are actively involved in the assessment process.

The practical application of formative assessment in the classroom includes:

- sharing or co-creating learning goals and success criteria with students,
- obtaining evidence of learning while learning is taking place,
- timely feedback (from teachers and peers), and
- self-assessment through which students:
  - monitor their progress against established learning goals and success criteria,
  - compare their current learning state with the goal and criteria, and then
  - make judgments about the actions they can take to attain their goals.[ii]

Taken together, these practices have been increasingly embedded worldwide into policy and the language of quality teacher practices.[iii]

Experience has shown that formative assessment implementation is enhanced when teachers have strong disciplinary knowledge, including an understanding of how learning develops within the discipline, and of common misconceptions and/or naïve understandings.

Sustaining a long-term commitment to lead formative assessment implementation

Experience has shown that successful formative assessment implementation occurs when leaders make a long-term commitment to formative assessment as a core catalyst for im-

proved learning in their schools (and districts), rather than treating it as the initiative du jour. In this regard, school (and ideally district) leaders must understand formative assessment, how it contributes to learning, and what they must do to support teachers in their implementation. It is fair to say that without the commitment and active engagement of leaders, formative assessment implementation has little to no hope of getting off the ground in any meaningful and sustainable way. School and district leaders best support and sustain implementation when they:

- implement formative assessment with a critical mass of teachers within a school-site
- engage in ongoing evaluation of current expectations around instruction and assessment and make changes to remove potential obstacles to implementation (e.g., strict adherence to pacing guides or mandated use of resources that limit daily decision-making based on formative assessment evidence)
  - develop and share a clear vision—aligned to district goals—and provide district-wide learning opportunities that integrate formative assessment into existing initiatives
  - describe how formative assessment fits within the larger district assessment system.

Establishing a culture, structures and supports for ongoing professional learning for teachers, principals and district leaders

It is essential that the school culture supports all participants through the

change process teachers will experience in their daily classroom practice when implementing formative assessment. Leaders shown to be effective in building such a culture:

- support risk-taking
- model collaborative relationships characterized by respect and trust

Formative assessment practice requires teachers to think differently about the relationship between instruction and assessment, to see feedback as a central mechanism in promoting learning, and to regard students as partners in the learning and assessment process. For most teachers, these represent fundamental shifts in practice; and making these shifts takes time, commitment, and patience on the part of both teachers and leaders.

When leaders provide long-term structures and support for teachers, sustainable implementation is more effective. Experience also has shown that teachers benefit from engaging in regular professional learning com-

munities that include the following practices:

- Establishing clear meeting expectations from the outset
- Having specific times set aside to focus on formative assessment implementation
- Having a clear focus and established protocols for conducting meetings

Conclusion

The Conditions of Success and Readiness Factors (see sidebar) described here are culled from years of experience working with district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to implement formative assessment. They can guide district dialogue and site/teacher selection in ways that are most likely to be successful—both in the early stages of implementation, and as formative assessment is scaled across the district.

Footnote References

i Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2003). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

Black, P., Wilson M., & Yao, S-S. (2011). Roadmaps for learning: A guide to the navigation of learning progressions. Measurement: Interdisciplinary Research And Perspectives 9, Issue 2-3.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. Review of Educational Research, 77, 81-112.

ii Absolum, M. (2010). Clarity in the classroom: Using formative assessment to build relationships.

Winnipeg, Canada: Portage and Main Press.

Heritage, M. (2012). Formative assessment: A process of inquiry and action. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Wiliam, D. (2011). Embedded formative assessment. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

iii OECD (2013). Synergies for better learning; An international perspective on evaluation and assessment. OECD reviews and assessment in education. Paris, France; OECD Publishing.

Readiness Factors for Formative Assessment

A series of key Readiness Factors emerge from the conditions described here. They can help district design teams consider district readiness factors, school-site selection, and teacher selection during the initial planning for formative assessment implementation. The Readiness Factors may also provide guidance during implantation to district and school leaders as they adopt specific roles in support of teacher practice, and to support formative evaluation to identify specific areas on which to focus improvement. Consult the source document to learn more and find self-assessment tools for each Readiness Factor.