



## **Sustaining Change in Formative Assessment Practices**

**Margaret Heritage and Caroline Wylie**

**Assessment for Learning Community (A/LC), 2024-2025**

## Sustaining Change in Formative Assessment Practices

This brief provides a complement to the discussion on sustaining change at the AfLC virtual meeting on January 23, 2025.

In their landmark paper on formative assessment, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam argue that “it is hard to see how any innovation in formative assessment can be treated as marginal change in classroom work. All such work involves some degree of feedback between those taught and the teacher, and this is entailed in the quality of their interactions which is at the heart of pedagogy.”<sup>1</sup>

Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended **disciplinary** learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners.

CCSSO, 2018

Making more than marginal change in classroom practice to implement formative assessment effectively takes time and commitment on the part of teachers and leaders, as illustrated by the quotes in the callout box to the right. Sustaining and deepening the changes in practice so that teachers can realize the documented power of formative assessment for student learning can be an ongoing challenge, particularly when attempting to make the changes at scale (e.g., across a district, a state).

Formative assessment has not only **changed me as a teacher** but I believe it has **changed my students** as learners.

**Sixth-Grade Math Teacher**<sup>2</sup>

To really implement formative systemically you have to take the time to do it from the foundational work first, and **you have to stay the course**.

**Assistant Superintendent**<sup>3</sup>

Sustaining theory-based change **requires more than maintaining the status quo or merely continuing the level of implementation achieved** when special project resources and attention end. Sustaining theory-based change means deepening **changes in practice and understanding in ways that keep practice vital**, responsive to changes in students, subject area content and classroom contexts.

**McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001, p. 304**<sup>4</sup>

### CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABILITY

The hardest part of any innovation, including formative assessment implementation, is not how to *start*, but how to *sustain* the innovation within the organization.<sup>5</sup> Research points to several factors, often connected, that make sustainability a persistent challenge:

- School district or school priorities change
- Competing demands are made on teachers
- Resources supporting an innovation run out
- Teachers make superficial changes or revert to the “old way” once funding and support is withdrawn
- Lack of leadership
- Lack of collaboration among educators
- Teacher resistance to change<sup>6</sup>

### SUSTAINING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Drawing from the literature and the experience and expertise of AfLC members, we identify a number of factors that contribute to sustaining formative assessment implementation in schools, school districts, and across a state. Typically, these factors do not stand alone but are interrelated. When beginning any kind of educational initiative, a plan needs to be put in place for not only how the initiative will be undertaken but how it will be sustained over time.<sup>7</sup> We

identify six factors that are critical for the successful implementation of any formative assessment initiative.

### *Clarifying the What*

At the AfLC meeting, Melissa Spadin pointed to the importance of clarifying the “what”. In other words, what is to be sustained in teachers’ everyday practice for continued and deepening formative assessment implementation. In this regard, teachers and leaders need to be clear that the **principled application** of formative assessment is part of effective planning and includes (1) clarity of and commitment to learning goals/targets and success criteria for teachers and students, (2) intentionally obtaining and using evidence of learning while learning is taking place, (3) timely feedback from teachers and peers, and (4) supporting self-assessment and self-regulatory learning processes.<sup>8</sup>

### *More Than Following a Recipe*

When teachers implement formative practices, they are not following a recipe. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam emphasize that **teachers will need to find their own ways** of incorporating formative assessment into their classroom work and into the cultural norms and expectations of a particular school community.<sup>9</sup> This view is underscored by Barbara Means and William

It is consistency of principle that matters, not uniformity of practice

**Harrison & Howard, 2009, p. 3<sup>10</sup>**

Penuel in their discussion of making innovations at scale. They note that people will make **adaptations to the local context**. They caution, though, that any modifications are bounded by a requirement to adhere to predefined core principles of the innovation.<sup>11</sup> For this reason clarity about, and consistent use of the core principles of formative assessment listed above is also a necessary condition for sustainability, rather than promoting a dogmatic adherence to a particular way of enacting those principles.

Grounding formative assessment implementation in core principles can help mitigate the possibility of ‘lethal mutations’ that ultimately diminish its effectiveness for improving student learning.

### *More Than the Flavor of the Month*

“I’ll just wait this one out.” “It will be gone in a year.” “This is just the latest shiny object.” We have all heard these comments from teachers. Oftentimes they are accurate. If teachers are going to commit to making the changes in practice over time to use formative assessment in their classroom, then they need to know that they are engaging in more than a fleeting initiative, which will disappear when state, school, or district priorities change or when someone in authority gets a “new idea.” **A clear and consistent vision is needed by leaders** and shared by teachers for formative assessment implementation (the *what*) as well as *how* this vision for practice will be sustained for the long term.<sup>12</sup>

Sustaining teachers’ formative assessment practices is helped when teachers can see a fit between their implementation and other state/district/school initiatives, for example, multi-tiered systems of support, and when it is integrated with other initiatives such as professional learning on content and pedagogy.

### Policy Alignment

Implementing formative assessment occurs at the individual teacher level and the organizational level needs to keep up so that **policies that support rather than hinder teachers' adoption of formative assessment** are in place. A case in point is grading policies that can conflict with the goals of formative assessment. If grades are overemphasized, then the use of feedback to students, a core practice in formative assessment, is likely underemphasized. Similarly, when SEAs send a message that the only assessments that really count are the state's standardized assessments, school leaders and teachers are less likely to regard implementing and sustaining formative assessment as a worthwhile endeavor. Ensuring that policy goals are clearly and consistently aligned across levels will be important to provide both the rationale and motivation to sustain formative assessment practices.

### Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

Collaboration and knowledge sharing are factors that influence sustainability.<sup>13</sup> **Teachers' interactions with others are important** because they provide access to knowledge, feedback and social support that enables them to deepen their understanding and their implementation of new approaches. Structures such as teacher learning communities can provide a context for ongoing support and feedback from colleagues and for sharing ideas and resources. This kind of collaboration is essential for sustaining formative assessment practices that teachers learn about in professional learning opportunities from experts within or external to the school or district.

Collaboration means working together on the **same shared problem and goals**.

**Lawson, 2004<sup>14</sup>**

Collaboration can create a space that enables colleagues to **challenge taken-for-granted ways of working together** and to bring about transformations in educational practice.

**Goulet et al., 2003<sup>15</sup>**

### Leadership

Research consistently points to the **importance of leadership for sustainability**. It would be fair to say that all of the factors for sustainability described in this brief are dependent on leadership at some level. State-district- or school-level leaders (preferably all three levels for sustaining formative assessment) build a shared vision and goals for implementing and sustaining formative assessment, they marshal resources, including time, coaches for teacher support, access to external expertise when needed, and they empower teachers to create collaborative learning cultures.<sup>16</sup>

Leaders need to be **knowledgeable about formative assessment and be actively involved** in school or district professional learning. The quote to the right from an assistant superintendent encapsulates what active involvement entails. When leaders are consistently involved in this way, it sends a message to teachers that formative assessment is worth their investment and that building capacity within the organization for formative assessment is a priority.

You have to have leadership who has an understanding of formative assessment] and who also is very supportive of it. **Not just giving lip service to it but actually involved in the work**, involved in the conversations, able to ask those questions. Those questions that will drive the work to the next level.

**Assistant Superintendent<sup>17</sup>**

A question for leaders to keep in mind at all times is, “how are my actions supporting or hindering sustaining formative assessment practices in my [state, district, school]?”

## THOUGHTS FROM AFLC PARTICIPANTS’ GROUP DISCUSSIONS

### *Concerns:*

- The work is dynamic and there are things inside and outside the classroom that our outside our control
- The work is often being moved by people who are removed from the classroom
- The work is often person-dependent and [there are] consequences when these people leave the organization
- When it becomes too giant of an initiative, there can be initiative fatigue and an overload of information, which kills the passion
- Constant changes – e.g., Covid impacts, shifts in teams

### *What we need to think about:*

- What success looks like – continue to clarify the desired state in relation to how students learn and how they learn in different disciplines. We need to be clear what we are fighting for
- How best to engage with teachers in the classroom: coaches supporting in the moment; long-term support structures that are not person-dependent; long-term relationships with teachers; grounding support in the student experience
- How to engage administrators and coaches in the actual assessment/tasks they are supporting
- Consistent, effective professional learning
- Flexibility for teachers, especially with varied populations, some of whom may be transient
- External support and guidance to sustain efforts
- How to develop and support coaches

## QUESTIONS FOR AFLC MEMBERS TO CONSIDER:

1. Is there clarity in my organization/sphere of influence about the vision for formative assessment integrated into ongoing teaching and learning? Are there ways in which I could help clarify the vision further for sustainability? Who else needs to be part of those conversations?
2. What initiatives are underway in my organization/sphere of influence that might be leveraged to incorporate professional learning on formative assessment?
3. Are there existing structures for teacher support that could be adopted/adapted for sustaining formative assessment practices?
4. How might I be able to influence educational policy in my organization/sphere of influence to better support formative assessment?
5. What systemic barriers are there to effective formative assessment implementation in my organization/sphere of influence? How might I address them?

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles Policy and Practice*, 5, 7-73. p. 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Heritage, M. (2010). Formative assessment: Making it happen in the classroom. p.5. (Corwin).
- <sup>3</sup> Heritage, M., Gerzon, N. and Mancuso, M., 2017. *Necessary conditions for successful implementation of formative assessment*. p.2. WestEd.
- <sup>4</sup> McLaughlin, M. W., & Mitra, D. (2001). Theory-based change and change-based theory: Going deeper, going broader. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2(4), 301-323.
- <sup>5</sup> Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2012). *Sustainable leadership*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. London: John Wiley and Sons.
- <sup>6</sup> Hubers, M. D. (2020). Paving the way for sustainable educational change: Reconceptualizing what it means to make educational changes that last. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 93, 103083; Prenger, R., Tappel, A. P. M., Poortman, C. L., & Schildkamp, K. (2022, August). How can educational innovations become sustainable? A review of the empirical literature. *Frontiers in Education*, 7: 970715.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin, M., Wilkinson, J. E., McPhee, A., McQueen, I., McConnell, F., & Baron, S. (2006). Implementing critical skills in UK schools. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 32(4), 423-434.
- <sup>8</sup> Heritage, M., & Wylie, E. C. (2020). *Formative assessment in the disciplines: Framing a continuum of professional learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2010). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi delta kappan*, 92(1), 81-90.
- <sup>10</sup> Harrison, C., & Howard, S. (2009). *Inside the primary black box: Assessment for learning in primary and early years classrooms*. Granada Learning.
- <sup>11</sup> Means, B., & Penuel, W. R. (2005). Scaling up technology-based educational innovations. *Scaling up success: Lessons learned from technology-based educational improvement, 2005*.
- <sup>12</sup> Fullan, M. (2006). The future of educational change: System thinkers in action. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(3), 113-122.
- <sup>13</sup> Prenger, R., Tappel, A. P. M., Poortman, C. L., & Schildkamp, K. (2022, August). How can educational innovations become sustainable? A review of the empirical literature. *Frontiers in Education*, 7: 970715.

- <sup>14</sup> Lawson, H. A. (2004). The logic of collaboration in education and the human services. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 18(3), 225-237.
- <sup>15</sup> Goulet, L., Krentz, C., & Christiansen, H. (2003). Collaboration in education: The phenomenon and process of working together. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 49(4).
- <sup>16</sup> Prenger, R., Tappel, A. P. M., Poortman, C. L., & Schildkamp, K. (2022, August). How can educational innovations become sustainable? A review of the empirical literature. *Frontiers in education*, 7: 970715.
- <sup>17</sup> Heritage, M., Gerzon, N. and Mancuso, M., 2017. *Necessary conditions for successful implementation of formative assessment*. p.2. WestEd.
-