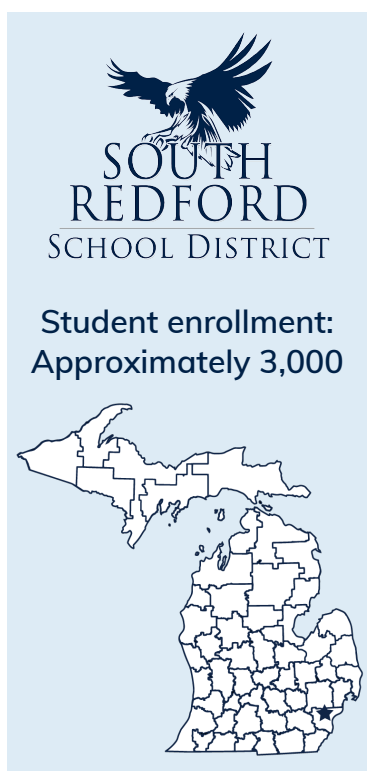


## Mary Ruth Bird: Architect and Visionary for District-wide Assessment Literacy



*This case study illustrates how participation in the Michigan Assessment Consortium's (MAC) Achieving Balance in Classroom Assessment (ABCA) program helped one administrator define a strategy and create an outline for a three-year plan to build knowledge and understanding of three linked concepts: assessment literacy, a balanced assessment system, and formative assessment as a process.*

*It also describes the detailed implementation plan that allowed her to embed this strategy into the work of the South Redford School District.*



### Professional background in education

Mary Ruth Bird has had a long and varied career in education, serving in many different roles. Prior to entering education, she was a researcher for a national congressional campaign committee, a survey

research data analyst for political candidates, and a stay-at-home mother of three. When her children started school, she volunteered often and realized she “really, really enjoyed the educational setting” and wanted to make teaching her next career. She earned a teaching certificate and went to work for the South Redford

School District in Wayne County, Michigan, where she remained for 23 years until her retirement in June 2023.

Initially, Mary Ruth taught first and second grades at Fisher Elementary School in South Redford. Then-principal Brian Galdes asked her to be a school improvement chairperson, and this evolved into a newly-created role of Data Coordinator for the school. Mary Ruth wanted to expand her data role and, to this end, she enrolled at Eastern Michigan University in a certificate program to learn all she could about assessment and data-based decision making, obtaining a Certificate in Educational Assessment.

When Galdes became the superintendent in South Redford, Mary Ruth approached him about the possibility of a district position dedicated to assessment and data. As fortune would have it, Brian had been thinking about hiring a data leader to run administrative data meetings. Brian asked Mary Ruth to outline the contours of the position as she envisioned it. After reviewing Mary Ruth's proposal, Brian hired her in a new position as the District Data Coordinator.

As its primary architect and visionary, Mary Ruth approached the job with ambitious goals. She and Brian decided her work in sharing data and leading data analysis should encompass all levels in the district, including the school board, district administrators, and teachers. Since Brian was most interested in improving administrative data meetings and developing administrator capacity to carefully analyze and respond to data,

Mary Ruth started with “just getting common data in a common format that [administrators] could bring to data meetings.”

**Mary Ruth started with “just getting common data in a common format that [administrators] could bring to data meetings.”**

Brian charged Mary Ruth with creating a top-to-bottom district culture of sharing data, having been inspired by how Alan Mulally changed the culture of data meetings at Ford Motor Company, as described in the book *American Icon: Alan Mulally and the Fight to Save Ford Motor Company* (Hoffman, 2012). Mulally shifted the data meetings away from sharing only “green” (positive) data, preferring that his executives bring less-than-positive “yellow” and “red” data, because from these, real improvements could be made.

Once Mary Ruth established a common data format that all administrators brought to meetings, she led them through protocols to help them understand the data, be comfortable with sharing less-than-positive data, and make action plans to respond to what the data were indicating.

With Brian's direction, Mary Ruth shared district data with the school board and ran “data dives” (data analysis meetings) with teacher teams, using data from district-created quarterly assessments. Through her professional learning—books, articles, conferences and training opportunities—she increased her assessment literacy and became very interested in the potential of the formative assessment process for increasing student achievement.

*Through her professional learning—books, articles, conferences and training opportunities—she increased her assessment literacy and became very interested in the formative assessment process’ potential for increasing student achievement.*

## Early attempts to grow teacher understanding of the formative assessment process

Formative assessment has been around a long time (Black & Wiliam, 1998) and was not a new concept in South Redford. Prior to having a District Data Coordinator, teacher learning of formative assessment consisted of district-provided professional learning days, outside workshops, and a one-year book study led by a facilitator with interested teachers at one elementary school. This type of one-and-done professional learning had minimal impact on actual teacher use of the formative assessment process and, not surprisingly, minimal impact on improving student achievement.

The limited take-away from this learning was thinking that formative assessment consisted of giving “exit tickets” to students.

Several years later, Mary Ruth learned about the Michigan Department of Education’s Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program. She decided to start by engaging a small group of teachers across the district in a cycle of planning-practice-reflecting on the formative assessment process in their instruction. Mary Ruth said the teachers

loved the FAME program, so she started several more FAME Learning Teams in subsequent years.

However, she felt this was only impacting a few people. The scope and impact were not as broad as she had originally envisioned to consistently improve student achievement/outcomes throughout the district. Teachers were either implementing it in sporadic bits and pieces or viewed formative assessment as an activity they didn’t have time for. She wanted to make using the formative assessment process a systemic practice in the district.

## Developing a plan to grow teacher use of the formative assessment process

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions across-the-board, particularly for the District Data Coordinator. School closures interrupted state testing and resulted in a new experience for educators—remote instruction and remote testing. There was no common or reliable data to analyze, much less time for teacher data dives. However, the pandemic provided an unexpected opportunity for Mary Ruth. Many of her regular responsibilities geared around state and benchmark testing were canceled and the district was consumed by remote learning, not data analysis. Mary Ruth took this opportunity to focus on her own professional learning.

During this time, she became involved in learning opportunities through the Assessment Learning Network (ALN) and attended “every single conference and

webinar” she could find on the topics of the formative assessment process, balanced assessment, and assessment literacy. She participated in the Assessment Learning Institute (ALI) and the field test for the newly-created Achieving Balance in Classroom Assessment (ABCA) program—both offered by the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC).

The experience of participating in the ABCA program and her close interaction with Ellen Vorenkamp (at that time an assessment consultant for Wayne RESA) caused “a light bulb to go on” for Mary Ruth. “I finally got it!” she exclaimed (referring to her “aha” that formative assessment needs to be used as an instructional process and that educators in her district needed a better understanding of assessment literacy).

She took to heart the Maya Angelou quote: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better,” feeling that this quote put her previous work in perspective. She realized she did the best she could with what she knew at the time, but could do better now that she knew more; this became her mantra for the future (know better, do better).

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In her search to know better and do better, Mary Ruth encountered the “Awareness to Action” model presented by Chad Williams, the UniServ Director for the Michigan Education Association. He postulated that for real change to happen in schools, four steps are necessary:

1. Awareness
2. Understanding
3. Commitment
4. Action

Mary Ruth had experienced schools that moved too fast to implement an initiative/program, jumping from AWARENESS straight to ACTION, and then abandoning it soon after.

She learned that real change requires spending the time needed to develop UNDERSTANDING of an initiative/program; only then will educators have the COMMITMENT to sustain ACTION.



***Developing understanding leads to action***

Source: ***Everyday Advocacy: Teachers Who Change the Literacy Narrative***

Cathy Fleisher – Professor of English, Eastern Michigan University

Antero Garcia–Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University

In this context, she realized that her earlier attempts missed a key aspect of how formative assessment improves student achievement, particularly with disadvantaged students: using formative assessment as a process, not a “thing.” This lack of true understanding helped to explain why commitment had not been achieved and action was not widespread.

ABCA participation helped Mary Ruth define a strategy and create an outline of a three-year plan to build knowledge and understanding of three linked concepts: **assessment literacy**, a **balanced assessment system**, and **formative assessment as a process** throughout the district.

**Building district-wide assessment literacy capacity by embedding it in the work of the district**

What follows is a detailed description of implementing the strategy of “Building District-wide Assessment Literacy Capacity by Embedding it in the Work of the District.”

**YEAR 1 — KNOW BETTER, DO BETTER**

Mary Ruth understood that making real change in an educational system would require moving purposefully and methodically in order to go further than before. Using the meeting structures already available to her—monthly administrative data meetings and school board presentations—she embarked on creating awareness and understanding of assessment literacy.

**Administrative Data Meetings**

The Year 1 plan focused on “planting the seed.” Mary Ruth’s aim was building the awareness and understanding of assessment literacy to spark an interest in and commitment to the formative assessment process among administrators.

Mary Ruth led the group through sessions organized according to the book *Ten Assessment Literacy Goals for School Leaders* by Steve Chappuis, Susan Brookhart, and Jan Chappuis (2021). She also used many other resources to design each session, drawing from

YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3 +beyond
<p><b>“Plant the Seed”</b></p> <p>Create Awareness Develop Understanding</p>	<p><b>“Grow the Seed”</b></p> <p>Deepen Understanding Build Commitment</p>	<p><b>“Grow the Plant”</b></p> <p>Sustain <b>Action</b></p>

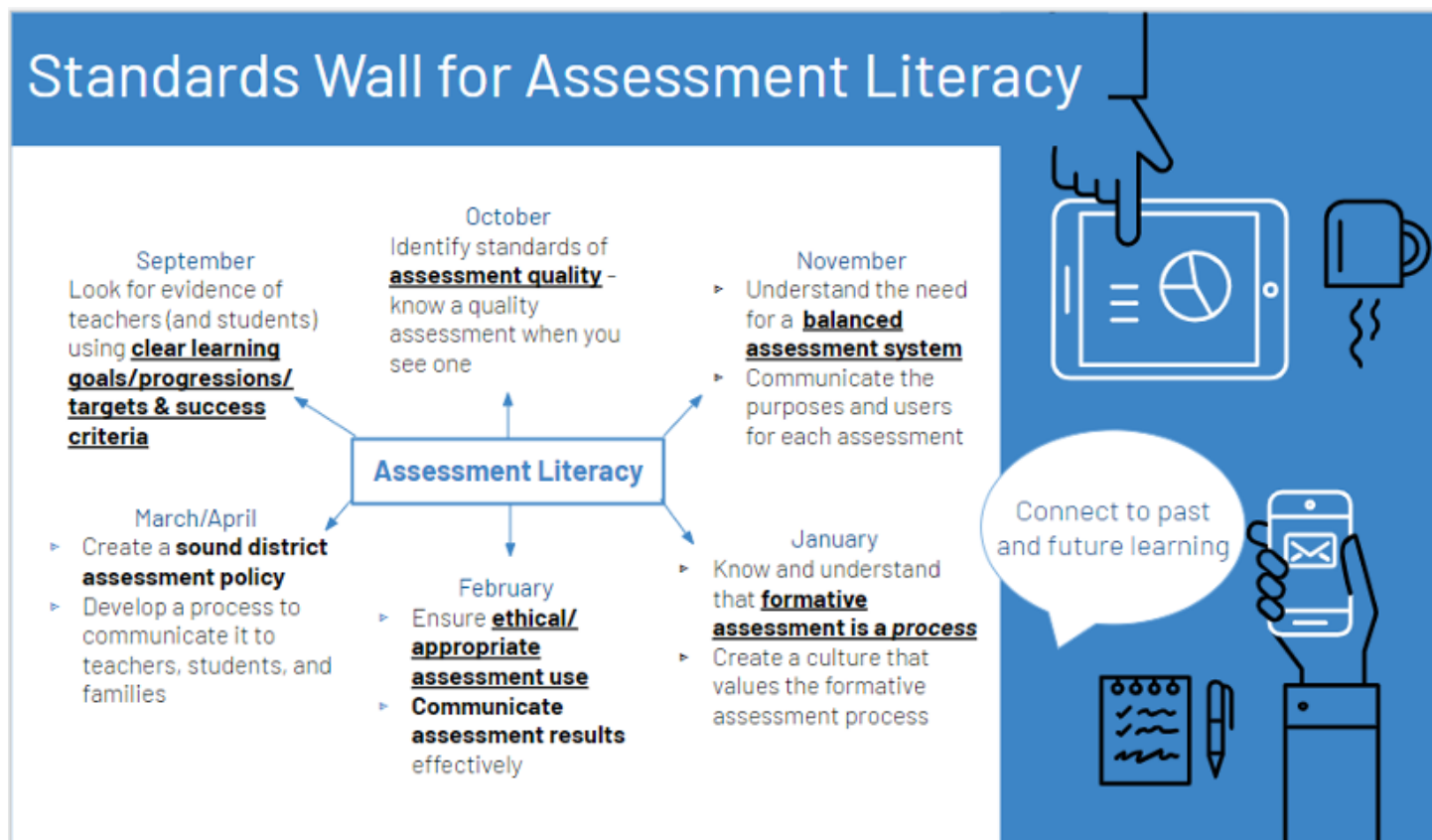


FAME, Assessment Learning Network, Assessment Learning Institute, Building a Better Assessment Future conference, and ABCA. The sessions highlighted a few key points of the different topics and were not an in-depth study.

Because she wanted administrators to move forward strategically, she advised principals not to provide structured professional learning opportunities, but instead embed their new knowledge of assessment literacy into their everyday conversations with teachers.

“I kept telling them [the administrative team], I’m just planting the seed for you. [This year] I just want you to have this background knowledge, so that when you are talking to teachers, you can [share] some of your new knowledge with them.” At each session, Mary Ruth followed the FAME meeting structure of setting a goal, trying it out in their context, and reflecting on it at the next meeting. Administrators kept track of their work in a digital journal created by Mary Ruth.

*“I kept telling them [the administrative team], I’m just planting the seed for you. [This year] I just want you to have this background knowledge, so that when you are talking to teachers, you can [share] some of your new knowledge with them.”*



Source: Mary Ruth Bird

## School Board Presentations

In a presentation to the school board, Mary Ruth created awareness and developed the board's understanding of assessment literacy, specifically the need for multiple assessments and a balanced assessment system that prioritizes the formative assessment process. She connected balanced assessment with the district's strong commitment to equity by explaining to the board that the "biggest bang for the buck" in terms of producing excellent student outcomes is using the formative assessment process, an equitable practice.

An enduring part of the district's culture is continuous improvement. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) approach is embedded in this culture. Mary Ruth demonstrated that the formative assessment process

is consistent with the already-existing continuous improvement practice. Finally, Mary Ruth illustrated how the necessary learning, commitment building, and action steps would be embedded into existing district meeting structures and professional learning opportunities to avoid being seen by administrators and staff as "one more thing."

As her work with administrators continued, a plan for Years 2 and 3 began to crystalize. Using the Awareness to Action model as a framework in Year 1, she concentrated on creating awareness and developing the understanding of administrators and the school board. She carried this work forward into the second year, and began to shift her emphasis to building commitment for the formative assessment process.

# Equity in Assessment Means Balanced

## What is a Balanced Assessment System?

### Main purposes and uses of assessment information

#### Assessment for and of Learning

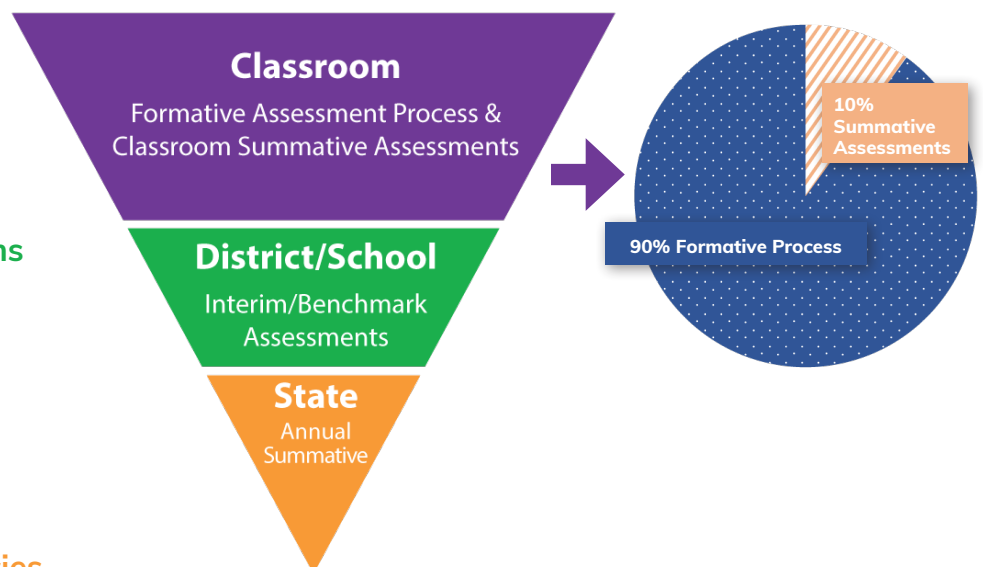
- Monitor/adjust instruction
- Inform students and parents about learning progress

#### Assessment of Learning

- Predict performance
- Evaluate curriculum/programs
- Inform student services and placement decisions

#### Assessment of Learning

- Evaluate learning,
- Evaluate school quality (accountability), and
- Evaluate district/school policies



## YEAR 2 – KNOW BETTER, DO BETTER

Mary Ruth “lived” her mantra of “know better, do better.” She had been concerned that her approach would be negatively viewed as top-down, but then she read the ALN Learning Point titled, “What conditions are necessary for successful implementation of formative assessment?” (MAC, 2018). She found the following quote gave credence to the work she was doing: “...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.”

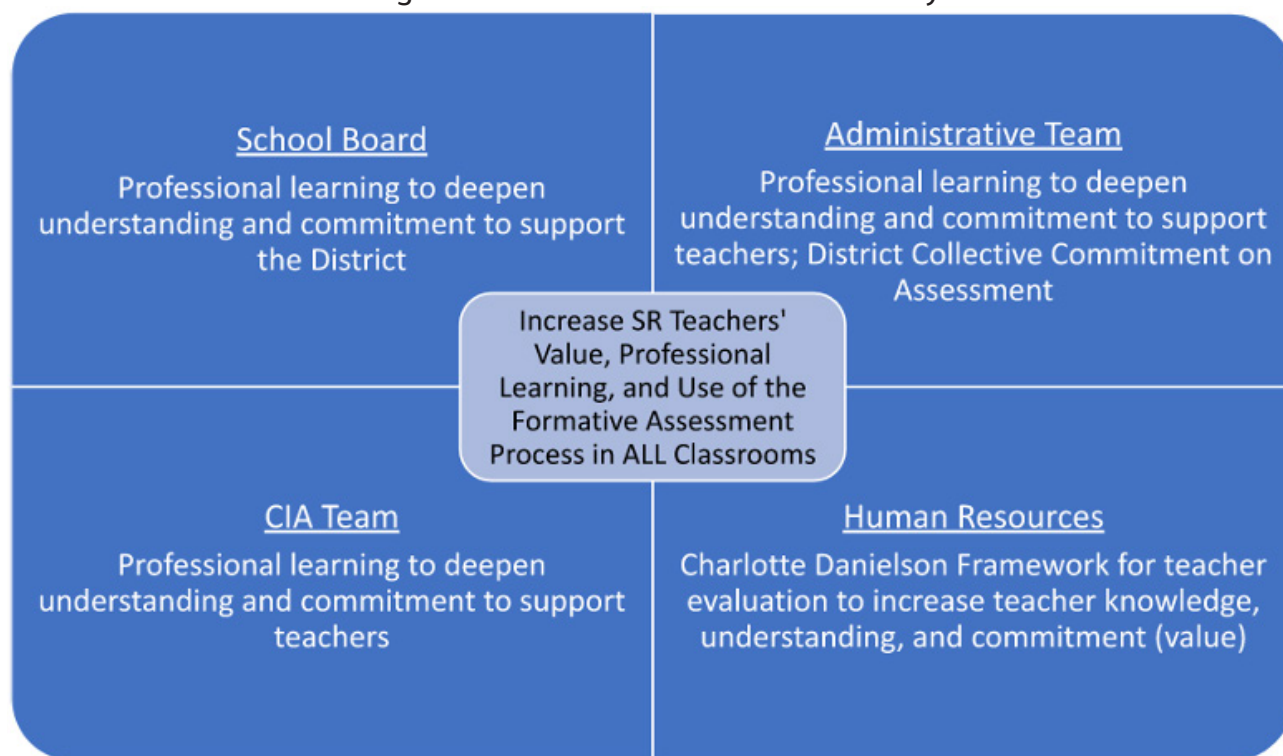
She developed the Year 2 plan as a “four-pronged” approach to “grow the seed” that was planted in Year 1, again using structures already available to embed the learning in the work of the district.

The four quadrants included developing awareness, understanding, and commitment among 1) school board; 2) administrative team; 3) human resources; and 4) CIA team (curriculum, instruction, and assessment coaches) to support teachers. She was fortunate to collaborate with assessment expert Ellen Vorenkamp throughout the year to continuously reflect on and refine the plan.

“...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.”

### “Grow the Seed”

A Systematic Four-Pronged Approach  
for making the Formative Assessment Process Systemic\*



\*Systemic = a fundamental teacher practice

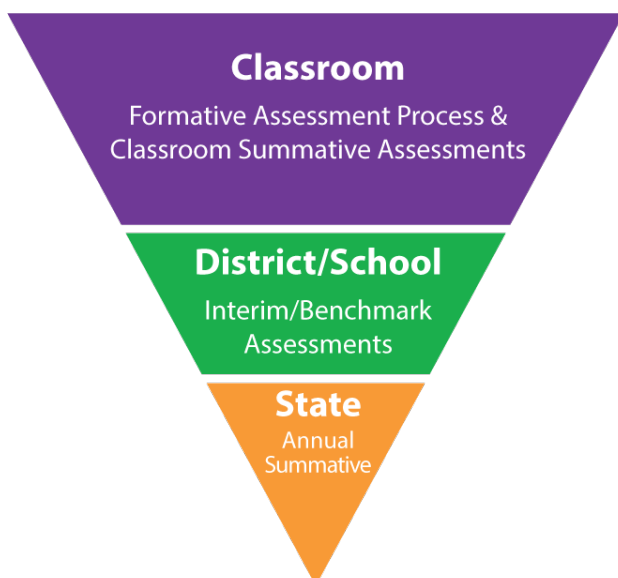
Source: Mary Ruth Bird



## 1. The School Board Plan

In her Year 2 plan with the school board, Mary Ruth collaborated with the new superintendent, Jason Bobrovetski, to create presentations on assessments and data that reinforced the assessment literacy concepts from her Year 1 presentation. This included deepening the understanding of the importance of multiple assessments and the balanced assessment system's inverted triangle within a real-world context (state and benchmark assessment data).

The inverted triangle is a hierarchical view showing that all types of assessments are important in a balanced assessment system, but the assessment practices in the broadest part of the triangle at the top (the formative assessment process) have the greatest impact on improving student achievement. She explained that the data she was presenting was important and served a purpose, but noted it was in the smallest part of the triangle at the bottom and was farthest away from impacting students in the classroom. It was also only one data point.



## 2. The Administrative Team Plan

Moving along the Awareness to Action continuum, Mary Ruth focused on building commitment with the administrative team. She encouraged administrators to develop a Teacher Learning Objective (TLO)—similar to a Student Learning Objective (SLO) teachers use for their evaluation—as a way to be intentional in their work with teachers on the formative assessment process. Administrators chose a focus area and created action steps to implement throughout the year.

At each meeting, Mary Ruth would check in with administrators about how things were going. To support the work, she created a self-assessment process for administrators to reflect on their efforts and highlight what they could celebrate and what they may need to recalibrate. In this way, Mary Ruth engaged administrators in a continuous improvement process.

Meanwhile, she used the formative assessment process for her own continuous improvement. During session discussions, she gathered evidence of administrators' understanding of the formative assessment process, provided feedback to administrators to help further their understanding, and took action by planning future targeted learning opportunities.

These learning opportunities included reiterating the impact formative assessment has when used as a process (championed by Dylan Wiliam) and connecting the process to:

- (John) Hattie Effect Size Influences,

- district initiatives, and
- equity practices

Mary Ruth also began to collaborate with the District Equity Coach; they presented together at administrative data meetings to model how the formative assessment process could be equity in action.

Discussions were held with Superintendent Jason Bobrovetski and the cabinet on the best way to give substance, purpose, and future commitment to the work of developing assessment literacy in the district. They decided that a district collective commitment on assessment would have a greater impact than either a board policy or administrative guideline. Mary Ruth engaged the administrative data team in brainstorming what should be included in a new District Collective Commitment on Assessment. Mary Ruth used this to write a draft, then the administrative team reviewed it and made revisions.

The resulting Collective Commitment on Assessment will be revisited systematically in administrative data meetings and in their work with teachers. The document says the district is committed to ensuring the following interrelated concepts with all stakeholders: **Assessment Literacy + a Balanced Assessment System that is Comprehensive, Coherent, and Continuous + the Formative Assessment Process = Improved Student Outcomes For All.**

**Assessment Literacy + a Balanced Assessment System that is Comprehensive, Coherent, and Continuous + the Formative Assessment Process = Improved Student Outcomes For All**

### 3. The Human Resources Plan

Mary Ruth worked with the district's human resources director to identify where the formative assessment process is in the Charlotte Danielson Framework being used for teacher evaluation. She encouraged the human resources director to highlight how the district's observational protocol and evaluation system could be used to promote the value and use of the formative assessment process for all teachers.

### 4. The CIA Team Plan

In Year 2, teachers and students continued to be impacted by the pandemic. The curriculum, instruction, and assessment coaching team was busy with supporting teachers in a second year of returning to in-person learning and all the challenges involved with that. However, the secondary curriculum coordinator/coach, Aliza Nagelhout, as part of her curriculum work with teachers, created and used a PLC (professional learning community) protocol described in Figure 1 that embedded the formative assessment process.

Aliza also successfully used a formative assessment process planning tool presented by the Michigan Assessment Consortium at the 2023 Michigan School Testing Conference in lesson planning with

new teachers. Aliza modeled how learning about and effectively using the formative assessment process can be embedded in teacher PLCs.

Figure 1

Embedding the Formative Assessment Process Development with Teachers	
<p><i>WHAT IF</i> all teachers valued and used their available time to work in a PLC discussing what looking at formative assessment evidence tells them about student thinking and figuring out together what to do about it – teachers’ focus switches to student <i>learning</i> &amp; students become more invested in their <i>learning</i>.</p>	
<p align="center"><b>Secondary Anticipation and Reflection PLC Protocol*</b></p> <p align="center">* Created by secondary teachers collaboratively with Aliza Nagelhout and Mary Ruth Bird</p>	
<p align="center"><b>Anticipation Protocol</b> (Before teaching unit/standard)</p> <p><b>Here’s What:</b> What do you anticipate/hope you will see in the evidence if students have mastered this standard/unit? What does an exemplar/example of a 4 look like? Share previous student evidence from this unit that earned a 4. If none exists, record what it would look like. <sup>1, 2</sup></p> <p><b>So What:</b> What type of students’ needs and misconceptions might you anticipate? <sup>2</sup></p> <p><b>Now What:</b> What type of support/feedback might you give to move a student closer to your vision? <sup>3</sup></p>	<p align="center"><b>Reflection with Student Evidence Protocol</b> (After/while teaching unit/standard - this Reflection conversation builds off of and continues the Anticipation conversation)</p> <p><b>Here’s What:</b> How closely does <u>this evidence</u> match what you hoped to see in terms of mastery of this standard (keeping the progression of learning in mind)? <sup>1, 2</sup></p> <p><b>So What:</b> Why was this particular piece of evidence chosen? How did the student apply provided support/feedback? What was effective? <sup>2, 3</sup></p> <p><b>Now What:</b> What might you change in the delivery of instruction, feedback, or support? What would be potential next steps for this student or instruction? <sup>3</sup></p>
<p>Annotation of how the PLC protocol connects to the formative assessment process:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Implies <b>learning goals and success criteria</b> are clearly understood by teachers and students.</li> <li>2. Implies <b>evidence of student thinking</b> is gathered (e.g., discussion, questioning, activities/ assignments).</li> <li>3. Implies <b>feedback is given and action is taken</b> (teacher, student, peers).</li> </ol>	

Source: Mary Ruth Bird

## YEAR 3 AND BEYOND: NEXT STEPS FOR SOUTH REDFORD

Mary Ruth feels confident that this work will continue after she retires at the end of Year 2 (2023) because of the structures and processes she put in **place and the commitment she inspired for many reasons:**

- The superintendent is committed to continuing this work by creating awareness and understanding among all stakeholders about the District Collective Commitment on Assessment.
- The administrative data team is committed to continuing this work in PLCs.
- Several processes and procedures, specifically the TLO process at administrative data meetings, will continue under the new District Data Coordinator who is also committed to this work.
- The director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is committed to expanding this work with instructional coaches.
- The director of human resources is committed to building ongoing understanding among teachers of the value of using the formative assessment process as an equitable instructional practice. The director will be engaging teachers in professional learning about the updated Charlotte Danielson

Framework (2022) and where the formative assessment process exists throughout the framework.

The administrative team is committed to being more intentional in guiding what teachers do in PLCs. They intend to be more systematic, increasing the number of PLC meetings and embedding the learning and use of the formative assessment process in a protocol similar to the one developed by Aliza. Teachers have given positive reviews about using the protocol because it is about their instruction and is providing clarity around the standards and a common view of proficiency.

Also, the PLC protocol will include a list of questions Mary Ruth adapted from *Ten Assessment Literacy Goals for School Leaders*. She organized the questions by the formative assessment process components (learning targets/success criteria, evidence, feedback, self-assessment) to guide teacher discussions and planning for using the formative assessment process in their instruction.

Mary Ruth wholeheartedly believes that a sustained collective commitment to this work will result in the formative assessment process being valued (and, thereby, developing commitment) and used (creating action) in all classrooms. Only then will student learning across all grade levels and content areas show consistent growth, and ultimately show a sustained positive achievement trend that all can celebrate in.

This case study references MDE's Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program. The Michigan Assessment Consortium is proud to provide service to FAME, including [Research and Development](#).





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Chappuis S., Brookhart, S. and Chappuis, J. (2021) *Ten Assessment Literacy Goals for School Leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Michigan Assessment Consortium (2018). Learning Point: "What conditions are necessary for successful implementation of formative assessment?" [www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org](http://www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org)

## Questions for Reflection

1. What in this case study about South Redford resonates with you?
2. How might the South Redford story influence the development of a balanced assessment system in your district?
3. What assessment literacy standards\* for assessment dispositions, knowledge, and performance might you need to develop with colleagues in your own educational environment?

\*[Michigan's Assessment Literacy Standards](#)





## Additional Resources

### [South Redford artifact documents](#)



Includes:

- Sample Administrative Data Meeting agenda (Using FAME format)
- Sample TLO (Similar to SLO)
- Connection to District Initiatives
- Year 1 Journal
- District Collective Commitment on Assessment
- Teacher Questions
- South Redford Balanced Assessment System: Why-What-Who

### South Redford artifact PowerPoints

#### [School Board Presentation – Assessment Literacy Year 1](#)



#### [Balanced Assessment System – Sample Slideshow Year 1](#)



#### [Admin Data Meeting – A Culmination of Years 1–2](#)



## About the MAC

The Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) is a professional association of educators who believe quality education depends on accurate, balanced, and meaningful assessment. A nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, the MAC provides leadership and services to advance high-quality balanced assessment practices and systems.

We believe all children deserve a quality education that prepares them for success. Quality education depends on the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and balanced, meaningful assessment that advances as well as verifies learning. Educators must be assessment literate to improve educational results.

Since 2008, the MAC has worked to encourage and support schools in:

- Adopting standards and educator curriculum for assessment literacy
- Improving assessment literacy and skill among educators
- Implementing formative assessment practices to balance assessment
- Embracing assessment as a positive tool to guide teaching and learning

Learn more about us and explore all we have to offer at

[MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org](https://MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org)

## About MAC Case Studies

MAC's Case Studies seek to connect educators to best practices in educational assessment. Guided by the needs of education practitioners, the MAC engages in study and action research to add to the collective knowledge about effective assessment practice. We create resources and tools that support assessment literacy and the use of high quality assessment practices and implementation of high quality assessment systems.



[MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org](https://MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org)