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|  | **District Assessment System Design Toolkit**  *Workshop #1, Advance Reading #4* |
| *Primer on Formative Assessment FOR Learning* |

**Developed By**

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## Definition of Formative Assessment FOR Learning

*Formative Assessment FOR Learning* (or formative assessment) could also be called formative instruction. Its purpose is to evaluate student understanding against learning targets, provide targeted feedback to students, and adjust instruction on a moment-to-moment basis. In 2017, the state collaborative on formative assessment of students and teachers worked with experts to define formative assessment. The resulting definition is given below:

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| 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 more self-directed learners.  Effective use of the formative assessment process requires students and teachers to integrate and embed the following practices in a collaborative and respectful classroom environment:   * Clarifying learning goals within a broader progression of learning; * Eliciting and analyzing evidence of student thinking; * Engaging in self-assessment and peer feedback; * Providing actionable feedback; and * Using evidence and feedback to move learning forward by adjusting learning strategies, goals or next instructional steps. |

While formative assessment generally embodies these five attributes, not every example incorporates every attribute. The definition and five critical attributes of effective use are based on research linking such practices to student learning gains. The core of the formative assessment process is that it takes place during instruction (“in the moment”) and under full control of the teacher to support student learning as it develops. Formative assessment is an integral part of instruction; instruction need not be paused. This embedded assessment is done through diagnosing on a very frequent basis where students are in their progress toward fine-grained learning targets such as those covered by a single class period. The ongoing diagnosis shows both teachers and students where gaps exist and helps both teacher and student to understand how to close them.

## Implications of the Definition

The definition and critical attributes make clear that formative assessment is not a product, but a process tailored to the details of ongoing instruction of individual students. Effective formative assessment occurs very frequently, addressing sub-parts of a specific lesson or class period. If tasks are presented, they may vary by student depending on where each student is in their learning. Formative assessment often occurs during regular and targeted questioning of students in small or large groups, and in observing students as they work in groups and/or engage in tasks. Formative assessment may be facilitated using certain technology and related tools. There is a strong view among some scholars that because formative assessment is tailored to the specific context of the classroom and to individual students that results cannot be meaningfully aggregated or compared. Many scholars question whether observations from formative assessment should be scored at all.

Another implication is the critical importance of providing frequent feedback to individual students. Providing each student such frequent and targeted feedback develops his or her ability to continuously monitor the quality of their own work against a clear learning target. It is this targeted and frequent feedback to students that is the most crucial part of the process (Sadler, 1989).

The definition of formative assessment implies that the frequently used term “common formative assessment” is a result of confusion about the nature of formative assessment. Other types of assessment may be used informatively for periodic progress monitoring (e.g., to inform mid-course corrections or modifications to curriculum and programming), but they occur too infrequently to inform daily instruction. Effective formative assessment is tailored to a specific instructional plan and a specific group of students at defined points in their attainment of learning targets. The critical characteristics of formative assessment is common across all teachers, and tools teachers use to implement formative assessment may be common across many teachers, but the process of formative assessment is too tailored to a unique classroom at a specific time to be “common.”

Data gathered through formative have no appropriate use in evaluation or accountability purposes such as student grades, educator accountability, school/ district accountability, or even public reporting that could allow for inappropriate comparisons. There are at least four reasons for this:

* If carried out appropriately, the data gathered from one unit to the next, one teacher to the next, one moment to the next, and one student to the next will not be comparable
* Students will be unlikely to participate as fully, openly, and honestly in the process if they know they are being evaluated by their teachers or peers on the basis of their responses
* For the same reasons, educators will be unlikely to participate as fully, openly, and honestly in the process
* The nature of the process is likely to shift in such a way that it can no longer optimally inform instruction.

These implications create a distinct difference from Assessment OF Learning, which is intended to assess student achievement after an extended period of learning. Simply giving students an assessment in the classroom does not mean that the assessment is formative. Use of assessment evidence in a formative manner requires teachers to achieve insight into individual student learning in relation to learning targets, to provide effective feedback to students about those insights, and to make instructional decisions based on those insights. During the formative assessment process, feedback and student involvement are essential. Teachers seek ways to involve the student in “thinking about their thinking” (metacognition) to use evidence to close the gap between current understanding and the learning target.

Because there is a great deal of confusion over what constitutes formative assessment, the next part of this appendix provides vignettes of formative assessment in practice. The four vignettes describe the work of four different educators to help readers to better understand what is meant by “formative assessment.”

## Vignettes of Formative Assessment in Practice

### High School – Chemistry Mid-Period Check In

As part of lesson planning, a high school chemistry teacher develops both true and false statements related to a part of the lesson covering a half hour in high school chemistry. Statements were strategically developed to assess whether students hold anticipated misconceptions. Following the half hour, students show thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs to the side to indicate whether each statement is true, false, or they don’t know. Based on the prevalence of thumbs down and to the side, the teacher may select one of at least four options:

1. Review that part of the lesson using a different instructional plan the next day.
2. Use pre-planned strategies to address a small number of misconceptions.
3. Strategically group students who put thumbs down or to the side with confident students to discuss their conclusions and monitor group discussions.
4. Work briefly with one or two students needing additional assistance while the rest of the class engages in the next activity.

### Middle School – English End of Period Check In

At the beginning of a seventh grade English class period, a middle school English teacher shares with her students what the three learning targets are for the day. At the end of the period, she asks each student to fill out and hand in a slip confidentially rating their attainment of each learning target in one of the following four categories:

1. I can teach this.
2. I can do this on my own.
3. I need some help with this.
4. I don’t get this at all.

The teacher adjusts the next day’s lesson plan by creating a simple task asking small groups of students to practice a learning target on which about half the students felt confident. The small groups are strategically selected to include students that are both confident and not confident with the learning target. She also reviews with the entire class another learning target on which few students felt confident. To do so, she asks two students to explain their approach on a specific problem. After gauging current understanding, she decides whether to instruct on that learning target again using a different strategy and different examples than the previous day.

### Elementary School – Monitoring Development of Mathematical Understanding

After a successful unit on simple two-digit addition (without regrouping), an elementary school teacher wants students to learn both a regrouping algorithm and why the algorithm works. He demonstrates to his students that their current knowledge and skills are inadequate to accurately deal with two-digit addition requiring regrouping. He does this by assigning small groups of students to solve a problem either using the addition algorithm they already know or by counting objects. In a subsequent whole-class discussion, the teacher highlights the conflicting answers and asks his students to think about how place value place might explain why the groups got different answers. He then asks each small group to work on developing its own solution to the problem. After visiting and probing each group to survey current understanding and developing strategies, he asks strategically chosen groups to share their developing solutions and builds post-activity instruction on the regrouping algorithm around them.

### High School – English Capstone Project

As a capstone project for a unit on persuasive writing, a high-school English teacher assigns her students to individually write a persuasive essay incorporating each of the unit learning targets. Each student is to:

* Choose a position on a controversial topic important to him,
* Identify reliable resources for information on his position and a contrary position
* commonly taken on the topic,
* Summarize the arguments for both positions,
* Use the logical devices taught in the unit to argue for his position,
* Use logical tools to argue the logical superior of his position, and
* Incorporate work in all five previous steps into a coherent persuasive essay.

The teacher divides the capstone project into four subunits (with associated assignments):

1. Choosing a topic, a personal position, an opposing position, and identifying reliable resources;
2. Summarizing arguments for at least two positions on the topic;
3. Arguing for the personal position and against an opposing position on a logical basis;’
4. Incorporating into a complete and coherent persuasive essay.

Along with other formative practices, the teacher spends class time making each sub-unit’s learning targets explicit and instructing on them. She also uses class time on the day each assignment is due to have students peer-review each other’s work, focusing on the learning targets and working on revisions. As assignments are turned in, the teacher provides formative feedback based on the learning target rather than grading each assignment. Only after providing at least one round of formative feedback on each assignment does the teacher grade the final product. She does this to ensure that the formative feedback fulfills its purpose and her evaluation of each student’s performance represents what was learned by the end of the unit.

## References

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