

What Local and State Policymakers Need to Know About the Formative Assessment Process



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Local and state policymakers are faced with many challenges. One of the most pressing is: “How do I provide and fund services for my constituents?” There are so many services to provide, and budgets are limited; consequently, policymakers must prioritize and find ways to address the most pressing issues.

There is no greater challenge than providing a quality education for students. In the flurry of educational reforms that have impacted every state, there has been one constant: All states have policies that include the belief that “*ALL students can learn.*” If this is a valid statement, local and state policymakers must find programs and initiatives to demonstrate this in their jurisdiction.

Because no single assessment is capable of providing all the answers to questions around instructional decisions, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) suggests that districts develop a **balanced approach to assessment**. This balanced approach would include an emphasis on assessment *for learning* (the formative assessment process used to adjust instruction based on student progression toward learning targets) as well as the assessments *of learning*—diagnostic, interim, and annual summative measures.

What is the formative assessment process?

Formative assessment is a process that occurs during teaching and learning to improve student outcomes. The following definition of formative assessment from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is used by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) professional learning program.

“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.”

— (CCSSO SCASS FAST, 2017)

Because the focus of the formative assessment process is on informing instruction on an on-going basis, this means it can be used in concert with other educational initiatives that focus on improvements to instruction.

This definition includes a number of important points about the formative assessment process.

- Educators must carefully **plan and embed** the formative assessment process in daily classroom instruction. It is an **ongoing process** during instruction and learning.
- Obviously, **student learning is the focus**, and students must be active, engaged learners. Students work with their teacher to identify their areas of strength and areas in need of improvement.
- **Feedback**, provided by teachers and students (self- and peer-assessment), presents students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and improve their work toward understanding of the intended goals.

How important is the formative assessment process for instructional improvement?

The formative assessment process is one of the most effective instructional interventions that schools can adopt. According to researcher John Hattie (2009; 2012), aspects of formative assessment, including feedback, are the some of the most impactful influences on student learning and achievement. In addition, Dylan William and Paul Black (1998) found that student learning gains associated with formative assessment are among the largest for any educational intervention ever reported. Their findings also indicate the effective use of the formative assessment process has the *greatest positive impact on the performance of low achieving students*. A number of other studies, ranging from large-scale research and policy briefs to specific research studies, demonstrate the positive effects and benefits of formative assessment on student learning outcomes (i.e., Andersson & Palm, 2017; OECD, 2005; NCTM, 2007).

Can the use of the formative assessment process close achievement gaps?

Embedded formative assessment definitely helps to close the gap between what students know and what we want them to know. It helps make both teachers and students aware of gaps in knowledge or understanding. This awareness leads teachers to address specific content and provide additional learning strategies to fill in these holes, and it leads students to set goals and track their progress toward achieving them. In some states and districts, “closing the gap” means teaching specific test content. In others, teaching students how to think and learn across a broad curriculum is thought more effective. Whatever system you may be operating under, formative assessment can help you close achievement gaps, especially for the students with the lowest performance.

Is the formative assessment process something new?

The formative assessment process is not something new. The idea of monitoring students’ progress in learning during daily instruction in order to determine how and what to teach them has been in use for a number of years. What is different, however, is the preparation of educators to use these practices systematically, as well as how to engage students more consistently in their learning and self-assessment.

Some states and districts have turned to supporting the use of the formative assessment process in their classrooms. Money has been allocated to provide professional learning and support for educators to reflect on their classroom practice and improve student outcomes.

Does the formative assessment process work in all content areas and grade levels?

Yes, embedding the formative assessment process in daily instruction is effective in any content area and grade level. It can be used in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts, and career technical education programs. It also has potential as an interdisciplinary tool. For example, an activity asking biology students to summarize in writing what they already know about cell structure yields information about writing skills and vocabulary as well as content knowledge; the teacher can use these insights to inform instruction in both ELA and science (Greenstein, 2010).

Students from pre-kindergarten to high school benefit from the use of the formative assessment process. At the very root, it is a teacher gathering evidence of student understanding, providing feedback to students to help them learn, and adjusting instruction so as to move student learning forward.

How can the use of the formative assessment process support instruction? Does it work with other initiatives?

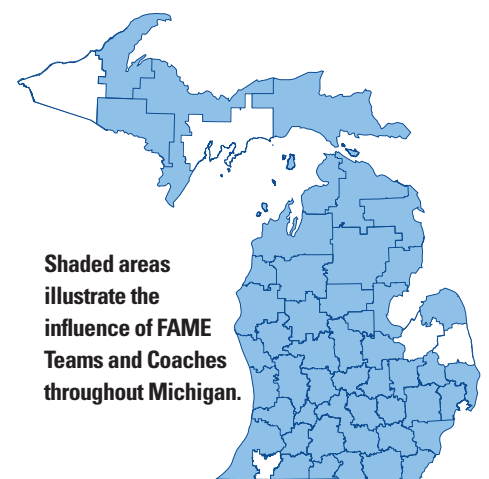
The formative assessment process can support all kinds of curricula and instruction by providing essential feedback to the teacher and students about what students are learning and how well they are learning it. Embedded formative assessment includes strategies that each teacher can employ on a regular basis in the classroom to monitor student learning. Teachers can then adjust the content and products of instruction to customize learning based on students' achievement of instructional targets. In this respect, the formative assessment process guides instruction through a reflective process focused on student attainment of the goals and standards.

Because the focus of the formative assessment process is on informing instruction on an on-going basis, this means it can be used in concert with other educational initiatives that focus on improvements to instruction. Whether interested in differentiation, constructivism, authentic learning, or standardized testing, formative assessment can help nudge students along the path to mastery.

How is Michigan supporting the use of Formative assessment?

Since 2006, the Michigan Department of Education has supported Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME). It is a professional learning program in which teams of educators are supported by coaches working collaboratively with them to learn about, implement, and reflect on the formative assessment process. The program involves educators in a multi-year commitment to promote thoughtful exploration in professional practice, supported by internal and external resources. Since FAME's inception, thousands of Michigan educators have participated in the program to guide student learning and teachers' instructional practices.

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How can I learn more about the formative assessment process?

Visit the FAME website at FAMEMichigan.org to learn more about the formative assessment process. The website offers information about FAME and the formative assessment process along with comments from formative assessment experts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do?** by Margaret Heritage. *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2007. <http://tinyurl.com/Heritage-Kappan>
- Learning Point: **What constitutes a high-quality, comprehensive, balanced assessment system?** Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2016. <http://bit.ly/BalancedSystem>.
- Learning Point: **What do we mean by Formative Assessment?** Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2017. <http://bit.ly/LP-FormativeAssessment>
- **“Multilevel Leadership for Assessment for Learning, and the Potential of Critical Friendship,”** (chapter 10 in *Leadership in Diverse Learning Contexts*, by Sue Swaffield, 2016). E-book available from Springer International Publishing. <http://bit.ly/2SdyMZ3>
- Presentation video: **Supporting Teachers Statewide in the Formative Assessment Process**, Margaret Heritage. www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/event/assessment-learning-network-2017-18-event-4 (scroll down to view video)

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