

What Administrators Need to Know About the Formative Assessment Process



Formative assessment is a process that occurs during teaching and learning to improve student outcomes for all students.

Society is in a constant state of change, and this is certainly true in education. In so many instances, administrators and teachers are being asked to do so much more and, too often, with too few resources. They face the ongoing challenge of providing a proper academic environment for the entire student population. At the same time, administrators and teachers are expected to identify and address the specific needs of each individual student.

School administrators, in particular, juggle many competing responsibilities while working to fulfill most districts' stated mission to provide a quality education to all students. Toward that goal, they are charged with helping their staffs select the instructional methods, programs, and support needed to help *all* students learn. This is where the formative assessment process enters the picture.

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)

This definition includes a number of important points. Educators must carefully **plan** to embed the formative assessment process in daily classroom instruction. It is an **ongoing process** used daily **during instruction and learning**. Obviously, the focus is on student learning, and **students must be active, engaged learners**.

Students work with their teacher to identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. Feedback, provided by teachers and students (peer and self-assessment), presents students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and work toward intended goals.

How does the formative assessment process benefit students?

The purpose of the formative assessment process is to provide information to students to help move their learning forward. By identifying students' strengths and needs, classroom teachers are able to adjust instruction in order to help students to improve learning and increase achievement of the intended learning targets.

Think back to your own learning of something new—a card game, a sport, driving a car, or playing a musical instrument. Instruction probably occurred in small steps. At each step, the instructor might have provided you immediate feedback. Then, using this information, you would try to perform the task again, this time a bit better. You may have repeated this process until the final goal was reached. This is what the formative assessment process does for students.

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 that 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).

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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 to make both teachers and students aware of what students need to know or understand, leading teachers to address specific content and provide additional learning strategies and support to fill learning gaps. This can lead students to set goals and track their progress toward achieving them.

To facilitate long-term learning, teachers avoid teaching specific test content. Instead, they teach students how to think about and learn all important content in a course. In this way, the formative assessment process can help improve student achievement, especially for the students with the lowest performance.

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. It can be used in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, and career and 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-K to high school benefit from the use of the formative assessment process. At its 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.

Can the use of the formative assessment process work with other school improvement 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, formative assessment guides instruction through a reflective process focused on student attainment of the goals and standards.

Because the formative assessment process focuses on informing instruction on an on-going basis, it can be used in concert with other educational initiatives meant to improve instruction. Whether in the context of differentiation, constructivism, authentic learning, or standardized testing, formative assessment can help nudge students along the path to mastery.

How can administrators provide instructional leadership in the use of the formative assessment process?

To be effective in the use of the formative assessment process, educators (administrators and teachers) need to be assessment literate. There has to be an understanding of the different types of assessment—formative and summative—what they are, how data is collected, and how they are used. Administrators must discern where their teachers are in this understanding and practice. They should provide the necessary learning and support for them to be effective.

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Administrators must also have an accurate understanding of their students and their performance on the different assessments. It is the combination of administrators, teachers, and students working together to use data collected from formative and summative assessment that will improve teacher instruction and positively impact student achievement.

For further information on how administrators can support the use of the formative assessment process within balanced assessment systems, check out the resources listed on page 4.

What support is available to administrators for promoting the use of the formative assessment process?

Since 2006, Michigan administrators and teachers have benefited from a program and process to support their practice in the formative assessment process. The **FAME program (Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators)**, sponsored by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and supported by the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC), offers a model of professional learning in which teams of educators, supported by coaches, work collaboratively to learn about, implement, and reflect on the formative assessment process. The program engages educators in a multi-year commitment to promote thoughtful exploration in professional practice, supported by internal and external resources. Since the beginning, thousands of educators have participated in the FAME program to guide student learning and teachers' instructional practices across the state.

How can administrators encourage and support FAME?

In most instances, interested administrators share information with educators in their school or district. They are able to access information about the FAME program and process, and then explore whether or not it would be a viable option for their setting. With support from MDE, they are able to create FAME Learning Teams, which engage educators in a proven method of learning about the formative assessment process and encourage its appropriate use in the classroom.

Administrators can determine their level of participation, which can range from direct inclusion with the Learning Team to simply providing the necessary time and structure for Learning Teams to meet. They continue to monitor and evaluate the collected data in making future teaching and learning decisions.

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How can I learn more about the formative assessment process and about FAME?

Visit the FAME website at FAMEMichigan.org to learn more. 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>
- **What Do Administrators Really Need to Know About Assessment?** Michigan Assessment Consortium, 2020. www.MichiganAssessmentConsortium.org
- **“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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