

# What Students and Their Families Need to Know About the Formative Assessment Process



**Learning takes time to develop; the formative assessment process is all about this development and much less about documenting scores and grades along the way.**

The school world can be confusing for students and their families. Students want to do well in school, and parents or guardians, for their part, want to help them to do so as well. But what does it mean to “do well in school” and how can parents or guardians help? For some families, the easy answer to the first part of the question might be that doing well in school means earning As and Bs. While high grades can be a part of school success, some students and families have found a way to shift emphasis from *earning* to *learning*.

Most people can probably remember a time when they did not learn much in a class, and yet they received a high grade. Conversely, they might have learned a lot in class, but their final grade did not reflect their level of learning. That’s why a growing number of families, teachers, and future employers believe that doing well in school should be primarily about **learning** (mastering academic content) rather than **earning** grades (ensuring high grades). And the best way to transition from an earning to a learning perspective is to engage in the formative assessment process, which includes:

- setting goals for learning,
- engaging in activities that promote understanding and then mastering content,
- eliciting evidence of student understanding,
- giving and receiving timely, descriptive, and actionable feedback, and
- planning for future learning.

With this in mind, what strategies and suggestions will help students and their families make the most of the school experience? How can they learn more about and engage in the formative assessment process?

## 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)

The CCSSO definition offers a number of important clues to how the formative assessment process works. 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**. The **focus is on student learning**, and **students must be active, engaged learners**. Students work with their teacher(s) to identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. Feedback, provided by teachers and students (self- and peer assessment), presents students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and work towards intended goals.

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## 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 each student to improve learning and increase achievement of the intended learning targets.

Think back to your own experience of learning 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. You could tell how good you were getting and how you could improve your learning. Then, using this information, you would try to perform the task again, this time a bit better. You may have repeated this process a number of times before your final goal was reached.

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

Embedding the formative assessment process in daily instruction is effective in any content area. It can be used in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts, as well as 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 biology 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 and beyond benefit from the use of the formative assessment process. At its very root, it involves 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. Students use the feedback provided to continue working towards improvement.

## How will the formative assessment process change students' schooling experience?

In the formative assessment classroom, students' experiences will differ sharply from the familiar passive learning patterns of lecture, note taking, homework completion, and examination. As noted above, when engaged in the formative assessment process, teachers and students will be setting learning expectations, engaging in activities, demonstrating understanding, providing and receiving feedback, and acting upon feedback to further their learning. Students will have to work intentionally to transition successfully to this new role.

Students will also want to develop a new set of questions when they transition from a focus on *earning* grades to *learning* academic content. In the more traditional setting, students are likely to ask questions like:

- When is this due?
- What was the homework assignment last night?
- Did I get full credit?
- Will this be on the test?
- When is the test?
- Can I complete extra credit?

While these questions are useful, they should not be the primary or sole focus for the student. When engaged in the formative assessment process and focused on learning, students benefit from focusing their attention and energy on asking a new set of questions instead:

- What is the learning goal(s) in this class?
- How will I know if I have successfully mastered the learning goal?
- How will class activities help me to master the learning goal?
- How will the teacher know how my understanding of class content is developing?
- What feedback am I receiving from my teacher?
- What feedback am I receiving from my peers?
- How can I assess the development and quality of my own learning?
- What can I do next to further my learning?

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## How can families or guardians help students and teachers engage in the formative assessment process?

Parents and other adults who oversee a child's learning can adjust their strategies to help students transition from primarily earning grades to focus instead on primarily learning. For families, this means asking different sorts of questions about how their children are doing in school. For instance, in a more traditional classroom (focused on earning grades), families/guardians are likely to ask questions like the following:

- Did you turn your homework in?
- What grade did you get on the last test?
- Have you asked the teacher about make-up work or extra credit?

Instead, families/guardians might benefit from developing a new set of questions when engaging with their children about school. For example, instead of asking a child how they did on a math test, they might ask about the mathematical content they are working on, in what activities they are engaging, or how both the teacher and student will know they have learned content well.

Other questions or conversation starters might include:

- In what activities did you engage during science today?" or "How do you think the activity helped develop your understanding?"
- How did the teacher check for your understanding today?
- Did you receive any feedback from peers or from the teacher today? If so, can you describe it?
- What do you feel is your own level of understanding?
- What might you do to further your learning?

**Importantly, students will not have to sacrifice earning good grades because of the focus on learning.**

Families/guardians might also need to adjust how they engage with teachers. First, understand that teachers will not be grading as often (remember, the shift from earning grades to learning). Learning takes time to develop; the formative assessment process is all about this development and much less about documenting scores and grades along the way. The premature use of grades to signify lower levels of initial learning lowers student motivation to continue to learn.

Parents or guardians can also ask teachers different questions that align with the formative assessment process:

- What are the class's learning targets?
- How can I help my child master these targets?
- What have you noticed about my child's developing understanding of the learning targets?
- What role does feedback play in your class?
- What kind of feedback would be helpful for me to provide?
- What opportunities does my child have to further his/her learning? Is he or she using these productively?

### Conclusion

The transition from earning grades to learning may be challenging at first. However, given time and sustained effort, formative assessment is a powerful process to help learning. Importantly, students will not have to sacrifice earning good grades because of the focus on learning. Rather, formative assessment is very likely to help students achieve both high grades and high learning achievement — truly a “win-win.” Formative assessment will also help develop life-long skills as learners and instill a sense of ownership and responsibility for learning.

### 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>

Visit the FAME website at [FAMEMichigan.org](http://FAMEMichigan.org) to learn more about the formative assessment process. The website offers information about FAME, the formative assessment process, and comments from formative assessment experts.

