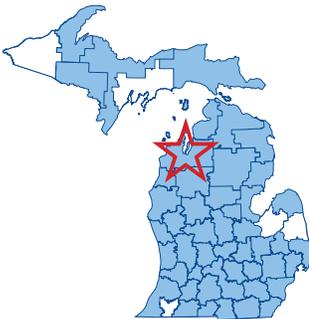




## Think You Know About Formative Assessment ... Think Again!

Traverse City Area  
Public Schools  
Enrollment: 10,000  
[www.tcaps.net](http://www.tcaps.net)



**The concept of assessment for learning (formative assessment) was first introduced to American educators in 1971 in the *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning* (Bloom, Hastings and Maddaus). Many classroom teachers think they understand formative assessment and believe they are using it with their students. This was certainly true for a group of experienced teachers in Traverse City, Michigan. But they soon realized there is more to the formative assessment process than meets the eye. They knew research supported its use, but they did not know how much of an impact it could have on their instruction and student learning.**

“Teachers think they are doing formative assessment, but that is not the reality. We are not taking full advantage of it because we really don’t know it. Teachers need to be provided the opportunity to learn about formative assessment—what it means and how it is used. We need to know how to make our students’ thinking visible...to get evidence of their learning. Better understanding has led to what it is and how to bring it to life in our classrooms.”

— Jessie Houghton, Principal

Traverse City, the county seat of Grand Traverse County, is located at the southern end of the Grand Traverse Bay in Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. The city has a population of over 15,000 and is the largest city in the Northern Michigan region. Its location on the water and proximity to Lake Michigan has heavily influenced the history and economic development of the region. Today, the city has a diverse economy featuring industry, agriculture, fishing,

and tourism. The largest school district for the city is the Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS). It consists of 16 schools: three high schools, two middle schools, and 11 elementary schools. Over 450 faculty members provide an education to nearly 10,000 students.

As in every district, many TCAPS teachers used formative assessment tools such as “tickets-out-the-door” and “thumbs-up or thumbs-down,” and



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they believed this to be formative assessment. However, they are learning that to actually maximize the impact of the formative assessment process, teachers need to do much more. They need to gather and use evidence of student learning to make informed decisions about next steps in instruction and student feedback, and help students meet their learning expectations.

Fourth-grade mathematics teacher Kirk Ranney described his prior experience with formative assessment like this: “We were considering formative assessment as an event as opposed to something embedded in our practice.”

The difference comes when teachers view formative assessment as a *process* rather than an event, as clearly represented in this definition from the Chief Council of State School Officers:

“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 FAST SCASS, 2017)

### Coach background

Jessie Houghton, the Traverse City Central High School principal with 18 years’ experience in education, had been interested in learning more about the formative assessment process, for she knew it to be an effective and proven way to impact teacher instruction and student learning. She did, however, have questions about how such a program could be introduced and supported with such a large number of teachers. Like most school leaders, she also wanted an initiative that would work well and support the

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***Coaches work and study along with the other Learning Team members on a common focus—the learning and implementation of the formative assessment process.***

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other teacher improvement strategies being used in her school and the district. Adopting too many initiatives can frustrate teachers and diminish the desired impact.

In 2017, Houghton read about Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME), a statewide initiative to encourage and support teachers in the use of the formative assessment process in their classrooms. The program seemed likely to answer her questions about how to introduce and support teacher learning and practice, and it promised to be a good fit with her faculty. She liked the idea of teachers learning together and supporting each other by working together in teams.

The TCAPS faculty was already comfortable working in professional learning communities (PLCs), which have many similarities with FAME Learning Teams. Another appealing feature was the role of the Coach within the FAME Learning Team. Coaches work and study **along with** the other Learning Team members on a common focus—the learning and implementation of the formative assessment process.

The more Houghton learned about the formative assessment process and FAME, the more she thought it had the potential to be a positive program for teachers in her district. It was also a good fit with other district-wide initiatives. Her next step was to share what she had learned with others and recruit volunteers to create a FAME Learning Team. Obviously, she wanted teachers who were committed to their profession, committed to their students, and willing to put in the extra work to make it happen.

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### CONTACT



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## Think You Know About Formative Assessment ... Think Again!

### District approach

Fortunately for Houghton and the students at Traverse City, a group of teachers volunteered to become involved—the instructional coaches of their existing PLCs. In some ways, it was an unusual approach to FAME. Houghton is a high school principal and the volunteer Coaches are elementary mathematics teachers. However, research on FAME has shown Learning Teams can come together and find success in a variety of formats.

Many educators decide to form FAME Learning Teams based on a common content area or grade range, while others are formed because the members all work in the same school, making meetings more convenient. Just as common, however, are successful Learning Teams that include teachers across content areas, grade levels, and from different schools. The key is for the Learning Team members to have a desire to learn, share, and take their learning to their classrooms. These desires were all characteristic among the TCAPS instructional coaches.

The initial FAME Learning Team consisted of Shelagh Fehrenbach, Erin Jongekrijg, Kirk Ranney, and Erin Sorenson. With Houghton as their FAME Coach, they brought to the team more than 71 years of experience in education. Later, they added Kaitlyn Rickman, another elementary mathematics teacher with an additional 10 years of experience in education. These teachers believe there is always room for improvement, especially if it will benefit their students.



Front row: Kirk Ranney, Jessie Houghton, Kaitlyn Rickman; Back row: Shelagh Fehrenbach, Erin Sorenson, Erin Jongekrijg

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***“We felt like we knew formative assessment, but it wasn’t until we attended the FAME Launch that we realized we needed to know more. This was especially true as we moved forward and shared with others.”***

— *Shelagh Fehrenbach,*  
*6th Grade math teacher*

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In their role as instructional coaches, they are expected to work together in planning and facilitating professional development learning opportunities for the rest of the staff, regardless of content or grade. In addition to large-group settings, they also make themselves available to provide one-on-one assistance. Since their PLCs include teachers at other grade levels and content areas, they are familiar with focusing on the *process* rather than the content.

### How it works

Houghton and her FAME Learning Team began their work by attending a FAME Launch into Learning, the initial FAME professional learning experience offered by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). As it is for most districts, preparing for and attending the Launch was the first meaningful opportunity for the Coach and Learning Team members to get to know each other. They learned more about the formative assessment process and the expectations of being on a Learning Team. At the Launch they began to realize formative assessment is so much more than they had previously understood.

The Launch introduced the team members to the FAME Components and Elements of the formative assessment process. While each Component and Element is unique, they work together and reinforce what is taking place in the classroom. According to third-grade teacher Erin Sorenson, “Studying the formative assessment process provided us with the ‘why’ and the ‘now what.’ It gave a reasoning behind the actions we were taking and helped us make sound decisions as to what we would do with the collected information.”

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After the Launch, the TCAPS Learning Team began to meet on a regular basis to learn more about the formative assessment process. They took a close look at their current practice and decided how the formative assessment process could be embedded in their work. As they became more familiar and comfortable with the process, they began to use it with their students in their classrooms.

When they met again as a Learning Team, they shared their experiences and reflected on what took place. The goal was for all to contribute and provide the classroom teacher with feedback. What worked well? Why did it succeed? In what ways could it be improved? What are the next steps for teacher and the students?

For many, this might seem like a cumbersome task and very time-consuming. However, comments from Learning Team members indicate they found the entire process to be worthwhile:

*"It is important to identify a specific area to focus our attention. As we became more aware and used it correctly, we became more efficient in our use, and it saved time."*

— Erin Sorensen, third-grade mathematics teacher

*"We learned how to collect evidence and use the evidence to make informed decisions for the teacher and students."*

— Shelagh Fehrenbach, sixth-grade mathematics teacher

*"Teachers looking at examples of instruction and student work enables the team to create a more positive experience."*

— Erin Jongekriig, fourth-grade mathematics teacher

*"FAME Learning Team provides us with more information and tools to share with other teachers."*

— Kirk Ranney, fourth-grade mathematics teacher

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***Being able to share a common voice using a shared vocabulary is a definitive advantage and creates better connections to the Learning Team members and the entire faculty.***

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While they worked as a FAME Learning Team, they also continued their work as instructional coaches for their existing PLCs. The PLC work included other areas of professional development and teacher improvement, but the formative assessment process became the primary focus. They wanted to share what they were learning about the formative assessment process as examples of good teaching. They hoped it might also become a way to entice other faculty members to create their own FAME Learning Teams.

FAME Coaches receive additional training by the MDE, much of which is offered by the Thinking Collaborative™—in particular, the Cognitive Coaching® Foundation and Adaptive Schools® seminars. Houghton acknowledges the importance of this additional training in helping her and her Learning Team members.

In her role as a principal, she also looked for other ways to provide support to her faculty and PLCs. Teachers who are members of the FAME Learning Team also serve as PLC facilitators. To support the development of leadership skills, Houghton often brings in outside consultants, such as Steve Seward of Seward Consulting. Seward has provided professional development activities for teachers across Michigan and is familiar with FAME and the work of the Thinking Collaborative™. Being able to share a common voice using a shared vocabulary is a definitive advantage and creates better connections to the Learning Team members and the entire faculty.

### **Impact to date**

Providing strategies and tools to teachers is important; however, students are at the center of the formative assessment process. Teachers know that the more invested and engaged students are,

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the greater the learning. As the TCAPS Learning Team members talked about their experiences with using the formative assessment process, they shared what they were seeing with their students.

All indicated the students were more engaged, since they knew what was expected from them. They knew they were going to be held accountable, but also knew they were going to be given the opportunity to be successful.

“Students were doing more looking at their work and knowing what they were doing,” Sorenson said.

Jongekriig added, “They were talking more about their thinking, and they listened more intensely.”

Ranney agreed and said, “More work was being done by the students, which provided more evidence of their learning to the teachers.”

The planned and intentional use of formative assessment dramatically changed how the students performed in class. A culture of trust had been created as students saw how they worked with their teacher to learn more.

In many situations, students are often afraid to share their thoughts and their work for fear of being wrong or being embarrassed.

According to Houghton, when teachers focused on using formative feedback, they saw a *huge* increase in students’ trying. It was because educators knew their students better—where they were and what type of support they needed. The data showed strong growth data for all students, with the biggest increase among lower-achieving students. Teachers believed this was because they were able to better support individual students’ specific needs based on the collected evidence of learning.

### Present status and plans

TCAPS is now in its third year of participating in FAME, and the district currently has three FAME Learning Teams. In addition to the original elementary mathematics Learning Team (grades K-5), there is also a secondary mathematics Learning Team (grades 6-12) and a Central High School Learning Team (all four core areas in grades 9-12).

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***“Students are more comfortable being wrong and taking risks. They know they will have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. In the end, they can explain what they are doing and why.”***

— *Jessie Houghton, Principal,  
Traverse City Central High School*

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The district plans to form more Learning Teams in order to eventually include everyone. This is very ambitious, but they know the power of this approach. Educators on a Learning Team explore and learn about the formative assessment process. Classroom teachers are encouraged to use it in their classrooms, share their experiences, and examine ways to be more effective—all for the benefit of students. They know this takes time, but the benefits are obvious. The goal is for the formative assessment process to be embedded, seamless, and happening every day.

### Message for others

The members of the TCAPS FAME Learning Teams are very emphatic in their message to other teachers about why they should take a closer look at the formative assessment process. As Jongekrijg described, “This is the most important piece you will get as a teacher.”

She says the formative assessment process provides teachers with valuable information about student performance so both teacher and student have a better understanding of what they need to do next. She couldn’t think of any other program that would provide so much.

Others cite how teachers sometimes feel like they are barely keeping their heads above water. With the FAME approach, teachers can feel like they are ready for what they want to do. The feedback to students and the opportunity to use the information helps students stay on course.

The FAME approach—the professional development model to study and implement the formative assessment process—has proven to

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be a way for educators to stay the course. They are committed to learning, they are committed to using it in their classrooms, and they are committed to sharing the results with their peers to improve.

“The team approach is very appealing and valuable,” Houghton says. “We feel so strongly about this approach, we want to share it with all of our faculty. It is a win for teachers, it’s a win for the students, and it is doable.”

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How might a school and/or district support the wider use of the formative assessment process by classroom teachers?
- What type of support from administrators and district offices is needed to promote such collaborative practices?
- How might faculties of school(s) work together to provide the needed support to learn about and to use formative assessment practices with their students?

### About FAME Case Studies

The FAME Research and Development Team members **Denny Chandler**, **Tara Kintz**, and **John Lane**, led by **Ed Roeber**, connect FAME participants to best practice and a growing set of formative assessment resources. They gather detailed information on FAME approaches with the potential to be replicated in districts across

Michigan. The FAME Project will share these stories through online resources, publications and media platforms. **To inquire about how your FAME Learning Team can be featured in a future case study, contact [dtchandler@fuse.net](mailto:dtchandler@fuse.net).**

Editor: Linda Wacyk, Communications Management – Michigan Assessment Consortium; [lwacyk@michiganassessmentconsortium.org](mailto:lwacyk@michiganassessmentconsortium.org)

## About FAME

[Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators \(FAME\)](#) is a joint effort by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Michigan Assessment Consortium. FAME is designed to reach all Michigan teachers and administrators with training in formative assessment. When applied to classroom instructional practice, the formative assessment process can become a vital part of improving teacher practice and positively impacting student achievement. In fact, the formative assessment process used by students and teachers in an effective and intentional manner connects to [Michigan's Top 10 in 10 Strategic Goals and Strategies](#) (Goals 2, 3, and 4).

***“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, 2017)

FAME began in 2008 in order to address MDE’s goal to provide different approaches to reach high school students who were low achievers. MDE partnered with Measured Progress to develop and implement the FAME program. According to Kim Young, who directs FAME for MDE, *“The formative assessment process is an essential part of a comprehensive assessment system. By financially supporting and endorsing FAME, the Michigan Department of Education is sending a strong message of the importance of formative assessment.”*

Today, this initiative continues as a collaborative endeavor of the MDE and the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC). The mission of MAC is to improve student learning and achievement through a system of coherent curriculum, balanced assessment, and effective instruction. MAC’s role in FAME is to coordinate trainings, maintain an extensive online library of resources, and conduct research on professional development using the Coach and Learning Team model and its impact on teacher practice and student achievement.

By 2018, more than 800 FAME Coaches from across Michigan had been trained to lead FAME Learning Teams. At present, approximately 250 active Coaches and Learning Teams are working throughout Michigan.

**Kimberly Young**, Michigan Department of Education Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability, has served as the FAME manager since 2006. Contact her at [youngk1@michigan.gov](mailto:youngk1@michigan.gov).

***“Working collaboratively, educators will learn, implement, and reflect on the formative assessment process in order to guide student learning and teachers’ instructional practices.”***

FAME Project Goal

## FAME professional learning model

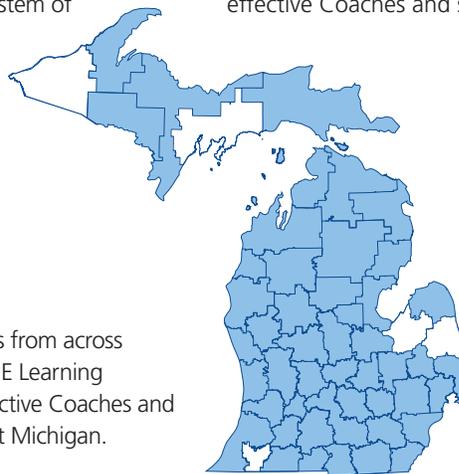
New FAME teams start in a similar manner. An individual learns about the FAME program from a conference presentation, a publication, or current FAME participant, and then shares it with others. A group of educators decides to become involved in FAME. One person agrees to take on the additional responsibilities of being a Coach, and then submits an application to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to form a new Learning Team. The number of new Learning Teams each year is influenced by available state and local finances and applicant location (MDE seeks to have active Learning Teams located throughout the state).

Once accepted, new Learning Teams are ready to start FAME training. Coaches complete their initial training via webinar and other learning sessions. In the fall, the Coach and Learning Team members participate in a session of *Formative Assessment: Launching into Learning*. This one-day training session provides information about the FAME program, the formative assessment process, and the Learning Team model. Teams complete the Launch prepared to begin their work.

Over time, Coaches have the opportunity to receive additional MDE-sponsored training — Cognitive Coaching Foundation Seminar® (Days 1-8) and Adaptive Schools Foundation Training® (Days 1-4). These trainings are critical in the development of effective Coaches and successful Learning Teams.

An additional layer of support is provided to each new and returning Coach through Regional Leads — former FAME Coaches who provide support for a group of Coaches. The Leads serve as a nearby resource person and valuable asset to Coaches, who learn — along with their Learning Teams — that they do not exist in isolation. Leads also schedule meetings with Coaches to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas.

Learn more at [www.famemichigan.org](http://www.famemichigan.org).



**Shaded areas illustrate the influence of FAME Teams and Coaches throughout Michigan.**