



# **BUILDING and SUSTAINING a LASTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM**

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**W**HEN THINKING about making professional development stick, two alternative meanings come to mind. First, one might think about the *stickiness of practice*. Professional development is of little value if teachers do not translate professional learning into instructional change. If educators participate in a professional learning session and do nothing different as a result, the learning provided to them did not “stick.”

The second type of stickiness—and the one we focus on here—is *stickiness of a program of professional learning*. Educational researchers have known for at least three decades that professional learning opportunities have to be sustained over time. One-shot professional learning events have very little chance of changing educational practice. In other words, *stickiness of the program* is required to give *stickiness of practice* a fighting chance. However, how to ensure sustained program success over time is less clear, particularly in the reform-crazy world of K-12 schools.

To answer questions about stickiness of program, we consider lessons learned about program sustainability from our involvement in the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program. FAME is a state-sponsored program that has thrived and grown for more than a decade, despite changes in federal and state leadership; changes in federal and state assessment and accountability policies for schools, teachers, and leaders; fiscal uncertainties; and advances in understanding what constitutes quality instruction.

More specifically we describe the importance of developing a quality program, securing and maintaining program support, and ensuring educator buy-in both as the program was getting started and later as the

program has survived and thrived for more than a decade. We conclude with lessons learned and a look ahead at what comes next.

## **LEADERSHIP, VISION, AND PROGRAM ORIGINS**

In the mid-2000s, as state test and accountability schemes were changing, Edward Roeber, then-Director of the Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability (OEAA) at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), had a vision for what assessment could become. As part of the No Child Left Behind legislation, each state was required to administer annual assessments based on its own standards, and use the results for school accountability and other purposes. Roeber knew from his years in assessment that a robust assessment system included *assessment for learning* as well as summative *assessment of learning*.

The need for work on *assessment for learning* became more evident in 2006, when the state adopted new, rigorous high school graduation requirements. Assessment could play a role in helping educators meet this challenge, but the potential was limited for high stakes summative assessments and heightened accountability to help students meet the standards. Different types of instruction supported by different types of assessment were needed.

*Assessment for learning*, or formative assessment, is a process in which teachers and students work together to set goals for learning, engage in learning activities, elicit evidence of emerging understanding, provide feedback in the context of learning goals, gauge their own progress and the progress of peers, and facilitate decisions in which both students and teachers

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think about and pursue next steps in the learning. Unlike accountability tests, however, the formative assessment process cannot be mandated. Rather, MDE would have to exert its efforts in building the capacity of local educators by convincing them about the advantages of learning to use the formative assessment process.

In 2006, how to best build this capacity and the extent of the effort required remained unanswered questions. The first issue was fiscal support. Using funding from existing federal and state assessment resources, work on promoting assessment for learning began in 2007. Initially, MDE personnel (most notably Edward Roeber and Kimberly Young) arranged presentations on formative assessment to schools in the one-shot format. These efforts yielded interest in the formative assessment process, but had limited potential to effect change in instructional practices. And, such one-shot presentations were contrary to what Roeber and Young knew about how significant change occurs — educators working for two or more years supported by external expertise and resources.

For their efforts to succeed, Roeber and Young knew that they would have to transform these presentations into a viable professional development program. The second challenge after fiscal support was secured, then, was to establish partnerships and construct a quality program. To support this, MDE joined the newly-formed Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) project, part of the Chief Council of State School Officers (CCSSO) State Collaboratives on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS) system. Being active members of the FAST-SCASS helped Roeber and Young to learn more about formative assessment, make connections with nationwide

expertise, and keep up to date on cutting edge research in the field.

MDE also began working in conjunction with Measured Progress, an assessment organization, to outline a program that would prove durable. Specifically, MDE recruited local Michigan educators who were interested in serving as volunteer learning facilitators (i.e., coaches) who would form learning teams of 6-8 volunteer teachers from their local contexts. Coaches would facilitate meetings, serve as conduits of resources, and provide a variety of on-site supports. MDE asked coaches to commit to participating in the program for at least three years and to recruit volunteer learning team members who would also commit to long-term participation. MDE expected that learning teams would meet several times over the course of the school year to discuss the principles of formative assessment and efforts to enact formative assessment practices in their classrooms.

MDE worked with Measured Progress to provide resources to help coaches and learning teams. Thus, in 2007, The Formative Assessment Process program (TFAP) was born. MDE and Measured Progress held an annual “Launch into Learning” event near the beginning of each school year that outlined the principles of formative assessment. The MDE and Measured Progress also provided a variety of resources, primarily The Formative Assessment Process (TFAP) guide. Finally, at the end of the year the MDE hosted a “success” conference that

included all participants. The success conference focused on sharing of best practices and generating ideas about new directions.

## DEVELOPING A RESEARCH-BASED PROGRAM GROUNDED IN HIGH-LEVERAGE PRACTICES OVER TIME

Shortly after the TFAP program began, Roeber left MDE and went to Michigan State University (MSU). He took with him his growing passion for the formative assessment process and the TFAP program in which it was embedded. The development of the TFAP program did not end once the basic program structure was in place and the initial learning teams and coaches began conducting meetings. Rather, MDE continued to build partnerships for help with research, evaluation, and development activities.

Young and the new OEAA Director, Joseph Martineau, connected with Roeber and his new team of researchers at MSU. By 2011, the name of the program was changed from TFAP to the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program.

The MSU research team surveyed, interviewed, and observed local learning teams to help MDE better understand how teams functioned and what needs MDE should address to improve FAME participants’ experiences. Many needs emerged. Initially, coaches were enthusiastic volunteers, but the vast majority knew little about the formative assessment process. This was a pressing



need that was not initially addressed well. Early coaches had only modest opportunities to learn. They attended the annual professional development event with their teams and were sent off to work with them independently. They had only the TFAP guide produced by Measured Progress and MDE to help direct the work of their teams. Surveys indicated that learning teams were bringing in outside resources from a wide variety of sources, some of which had little or nothing to do with formative assessment. Meetings, in turn, lacked a clear focus on learning about and learning to use the formative assessment process.

### **Professional learning for coaches**

Young recognized this early challenge and began to make provisions for coach learning. First, she knew that coaches found it challenging to lead learning team meetings. In response, she partnered with Thinking Collaborative™ to offer eight days of Cognitive Coaching Seminars® and four days of Adaptive Schools training to help coaches facilitate meetings and mediate group and individual thinking.

### **Resource development**

Early resources that might help coaches learn about formative assessment were also meager. Building

up a bank of comprehensive resource became a priority and remains challenging and time-consuming work to the present day. The work of resource creation began in earnest in 2013 when Roeber changed jobs once again, becoming Director of Assessment of the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC). While in that role, Roeber transitioned research, evaluation, and development activities from MSU to the MAC in 2015. With his new team and with funding secured from a contract with MDE, the MAC team continued the research activities of previous years while greatly increasing development of learning resources for coaches and learning team members. The MAC team established a FAME website that housed a growing number of resources that included example classroom videos, sample meeting agendas, graphic organizers, protocols for leading meetings, and scholarly and professional literature.

In addition to securing resources, the MAC completely redesigned the TFAP guide. As the program developed, both Young and Roeber grew dissatisfied with the TFAP's content and organization. They had learned a lot about formative assessment over their years promoting the FAME program, and this learning was not reflected in the TFAP guide. It was in the course of

collecting evidence of teacher use of the formative assessment process that this began to change.

The MAC team began to collect video recordings of teachers using the formative assessment process in their classrooms. MAC team members co-coded the video recordings with the teachers who were recorded, using a rubric based on the formative assessment practices outlined in the TFAP guide. Discussions with teachers were eye-opening. Teachers did not like several of the dimensions of the rubrics used in coding and felt the TFAP's rubric was not understandable. As members of the MAC team worked with the teachers, a more concise set of formative assessment practices emerged, and their descriptions were written in more teacher-friendly language.

In 2016, the FAME program leaders decided to shift from the TFAP conceptualization of formative assessment to the updated FAME 2.0. The MAC team wrote the resource that would replace the TFAP Guide—The *FAME Learning Guide* (FLG). The FLG reflected the most recent research on the formative assessment process and organized formative assessment into five components and 13 elements that would be easy to understand. The MAC team also prepared a version of the FLG specifically for coaches that included all FLG content as well as coach resources the MAC team had created and assembled for each component and element.

### **Support restructure**

In order to provide coaches with more learning opportunities, Young also altered the structure of the program slightly. She selected ten coaches from around the state to fill the newly created “lead-coach” role. These were coaches who showed particular promise and commitment to the FAME program. Leads, as they came to be called,

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would be responsible for helping coaches think through challenges, connecting experienced teams to the newly created resource bank, and shepherding new coaches and learning teams in their initial experiences with the program. Leads would also assist Young, Roeber, and the MAC team by piloting resources, providing feedback, and sharing the concerns that emerged from their interactions with coaches and learning teams.

### **Strategic partnership**

Finally, in order to promote coach learning, MDE and the MAC partnered in 2017 with Margaret Heritage, a world-renowned expert on formative assessment. Dr. Heritage has helped bolster coach learning through conducting in-person seminars and lectures on the principles and promises of formative assessment, leading classroom walkthroughs, and developing a series of webinars to enhance understanding of formative assessment.

In sum, MDE leadership—initiated by Roeber and continued by other MDE-OEAA directors, including Andy Middlestead today, and supported throughout by Young—built and sustained the FAME program, which engages local educators and blends state and local responsibilities for maximum engagement. Over time, MDE has connected with various partners to secure a wide array of resources that help address emerging challenges and respond to local needs.

## **LESSONS FROM FAME ABOUT THE STICKINESS OF PROGRAM**

From the history of FAME, we can draw several lessons about the stickiness of program.

First, **enthusiastic advocates are essential, but they cannot do it alone.** A few key personnel envisioned the original FAME program, secured initial funding, and recruited schools to participate. However, these enthusiastic

advocates also had to form partnerships that would help infuse expertise and provide program guidance.

Second, **programs like FAME must be grounded in principles of effective practice.** FAME began in a time of some confusion about formative assessment. MDE administrators and those close to the program insisted that formative assessment is a *process* rather than a tool (i.e., benchmark test, quiz, or interim assessment). While the FAME program never wavered from this early commitment, in other ways it has been flexible to reimagine formative assessment as research put its main principles into sharper relief. That is, FAME has continued to insist on formative assessment as a process, but it has been willing to refine what constitutes the formative assessment process and incorporate this learning into the program.

Third, **mechanisms to monitor program activities and learn about program implementation are critical.** Enlisting a research and development team has helped the program in many ways. The research team surfaced issues with local capacity and then helped the FAME program respond to these needs by creating new resources, expanding the conceptualization of formative assessment that is included in the *FAME Learning Guide*. The research team has also provided other resources that help FAME learning teams deepen their understanding and use of the formative assessment process.

Finally, **the FAME program sheds light on the importance of distributing leadership for professional learning.** Like its commitment to defining formative assessment as a process, the FAME program has had a long commitment to distributing responsibilities for conducting activities with the program and working “side-by-side” with local schools and districts. Coaches and leads are exclusively situated in roles outside MDE—in schools, districts, and regional education offices. Much of the

expertise related to formative assessment is cultivated in the interactions among leads, coaches, and learning team members.

Furthermore, while learning teams look to MDE for resources and occasional guidance, MDE looks to the learning teams to provide their perspective on materials and their experiences with the FAME program and their enactment of formative assessment practices in their classrooms. Thus, MDE and local teams are engaged in a mutual loop of learning and improvement that helps sustain the program.

The FAME program has sustained success in a tumultuous policy and fiscal environment. Several characteristics of the program—partnerships, mixture of flexibility and commitment to key principles, continuity of learning, and distributed leadership responsibilities—have helped the program attain its enviable position. These practices will help to ensure that the program will thrive well into the future.

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