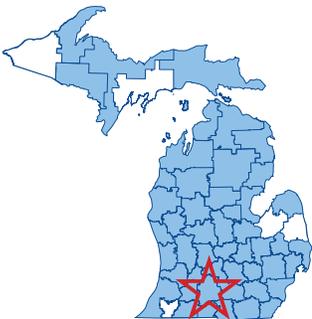




## Harper Creek Community Schools: Sustaining FAME Participation in a Time of COVID

Harper Creek  
Community Schools

Enrollment: 2,800 students  
[www.harpercreek.net](http://www.harpercreek.net)



**Like all school districts, Harper Creek Community Schools in Calhoun County (MI) was profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and these effects took some toll on the district's FAME Learning Team. This case study describes how the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program began and grew in Harper Creek and how the FAME Learning Team has persisted — and even grown — through their formative assessment process journey, despite the challenges the pandemic created. Follow along as they describe their journey of “curiosity-fueled enthusiasm along an uncertain road.”**

### FAME comes to Harper Creek

Laura Williams, Harper Creek Community Schools Assistant Superintendent, has been the main catalyst for FAME participation in the district. FAME fits in well with Laura's broader work that aims to coordinate opportunities for teachers to learn together. She accomplishes this work through helping to align district improvement plans and initiatives, securing resources for professional learning, and directly interacting with teachers about their instruction, particularly their use of formative assessment practices.

Laura has cultivated a long-standing passion for teacher empowerment and over the years, this commitment has found expression in many professional activities.

In the early 2000s, Laura took advantage of the opportunity to learn about Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> and she instantly fell in love with this approach to engaging teachers about their instruction.

Over the next several years, Laura continued to develop her skills as a coach, and she attended professional learning sessions about Cognitive Coaching whenever she could. During this time, Laura met and developed a strong relationship with Kim Young from the Michigan Department of Education. When the FAME program launched in 2007, Laura eagerly accepted Kim's invitation to participate.

Over the past 15 years, FAME has been foundational in Laura's pursuit of promoting high-quality teaching and



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learning across classrooms. However, the work has not always been easy. One of the primary early challenges she faced while working as a building principal in another district was aligning FAME with other school improvement initiatives and reforms. With this challenge in mind, Laura decided to remain a “Friend of FAME” without formally participating. Over time, she grew to appreciate the “timeless simplicity of the FAME components” and began to see how FAME could complement and strengthen other district initiatives.

When Laura came to Harper Creek as the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction in 2017, she saw how she could make strong connections between FAME and the other innovative work she and other Harper Creek educators were doing, most notably the establishment of grade- and department-level professional learning communities (PLCs). Despite this enthusiasm and vision, though, Laura still needed to articulate the connections to others.

This articulation took a while, but during the 2018-19 school year, attending a PLC training helped teachers see the relationship between PLCs, collaboration, and collegial learning about innovative and effective instructional practices such as the formative assessment process.

As the connections began to form in educators’ minds, Laura began constructing a district team to lead the FAME work. Laura built the Harper Creek FAME Learning Team in several ways. First, she made the opportunity widely available to Harper Creek educators by sending an invitation email districtwide. She also

### Meet the Harper Creek FAME Learning Team



**Cheryl Bess** has been an elementary school teacher for more than 25 years. She has worked at Sonoma Elementary School for the entirety of her career. She currently teaches third grade.



**Lindsey Cook** has worked in education for 18 years as a para-professional, substitute teacher, and classroom teacher. She currently teaches fourth grade at Sonoma Elementary School.



**Tiffini Hurley** is a teacher in the English department at Harper Creek High School, where she has worked for six years. She is a member of the Harper Creek FAME Learning Team



**Shalen King-Short** has a wide range of experience as a teacher and administrator. She is currently working as the principal of Sonoma Elementary School in Harper Creek. While she is new to her role and district, she participated in FAME for several years while working in her prior district.



**Karlene Neal** is in her 21st year of teaching middle school and high school math and science. She came to Harper Creek in 2021 in search of a more robust professional community.



**Laura Williams** has over 30 years of experience in education as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator. She is currently an assistant superintendent in Harper Creek Public Schools.

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*Ultimately, the Harper Creek Learning Team hopes their model of learning, applying, and sharing will grow both the FAME program and the enactment of formative assessment practices in the district.*

## Harper Creek Community Schools: Sustaining FAME Participation

pursued a more strategic and targeted approach to building a formative assessment Learning Team. Whenever a conversation turned to educators' desire for more professional learning opportunities or curiosity about how to better use assessment or instructional expertise to promote student learning, she would encourage them to join her team of learners about the formative assessment process. Ultimately, about ten Harper Creek educators from Harper Creek High School and Sonoma Elementary School began to meet regularly to discuss the formative assessment process as part of the FAME program.

Most of the Harper Creek educators signed up to be part of the FAME project without really knowing much about the formative assessment process. Nevertheless, they were interested in participating and decided to take a chance. Fourth-grade teacher Lindsey Cook explains her rationale:

*"I was really excited that FAME was a three-year program because it wasn't going to be just a one-time thing. It was going to be progressive. And we were going to be able to have support through it, dialogue about it, and put some things in practice in our classroom and be able to reflect on it and then come back to it. It was that kind of a learning progression that excited me about it."*

High-school English teacher Tiffini Hurley had similar reasoning. When Tiffini heard about the FAME Learning Team, she was eager to participate.

*"I love learning different strategies and things. And so, when I saw this opportunity, I thought, 'Why not try it out?' I was looking to improve my craft and improve how I use data to inform my practice, and so I thought this would be a really good way for me to improve."*

### How Harper Creek promotes and develops formative assessment

Since its beginning, the Harper Creek FAME Learning Team has made steady and demonstrable progress. Participating educators at Sonoma have noticed improved student growth and proficiency data, which they are excited to share with others. This improvement is helping promote formative assessment practices throughout classrooms as FAME Learning Team members share the principles of the formative assessment process with their colleagues in their grade or department PLCs. In other words, FAME Learning Team members are learning about formative assessment, applying their learning in their classrooms, and sharing this learning with colleagues.

Karlene Neal, a science and math teacher at Harper Creek High School, described how this arrangement works for her:

*"I've really bought into the [formative assessment] process. I apply it. I do the reading. I try it in my classroom. And then I go to my peers in science and say, 'Okay. I was taking this class and I learned this and I tried this and here's what I found. I'd really like you to try it.' And they've been really good about it."*

Fourth-grade teacher Lindsey Cook described a similar process at Sonoma Elementary:

*"I'm taking this [learning] back to my third-grade team. In my PLC meetings I'm trying to talk to them a little bit about what FAME is and why it would be great for them to maybe join, and what I'm learning in it, and what we could do to make students successful."*

Like other members of the Harper Creek Learning Team, Lindsey has relied heavily on the FAME learning opportunities provided by the Michigan Department of Education.

"Those meetings are really very valuable, because they have showed me if I'm going in the right direction," Lindsey said. Or if my

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understanding is really muddy, [the sessions] help clear my understanding or help me bring concepts back to myself.”

Other members of the Harper Creek District FAME Learning Team are administrators who use the strategies learned in FAME to enhance development toward authentic PLC culture. For instance, Sonoma principal Shalen King-Short took time in her first year as principal to “pause, breathe, and build relationships” that she could then leverage to engage teachers in the formative assessment process. More specifically, through actively engaging teachers about their instruction, Shalen proved she could “walk-the-walk” of teaching, and she was quickly able to discuss core elements of teaching and learning, including the formative assessment process.

At Sonoma, Shalen is working with a small group of teachers, while also extending the learning about formative assessment to the entire staff by providing resources and working with teachers in small groups and one-on-one to understand the formative assessment process and its components. In addition to these individual efforts, Shalen insists that success with formative assessment stems from a commitment across levels of district organization, and this includes teacher leadership at the site level. Shalen explains:

*“I planted a lot of seeds and could find teachers that I could get on the bandwagon for [formative assessment] and have that distributed leadership, saying, ‘Hey. Let’s check this out together.’ Then they would get excited about the work and drive the work.”*

The overall impact of the FAME program in Harper Creek has been considerable and continues to grow. For instance, Karlene Neal, who was in her first full year at Harper Creek as a science teacher, came to the district in search of a more robust professional community and professional

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growth as a teacher. Participating in FAME played a key role in this growth, as she explained:

*“FAME has been very invigorating for me... I had made up my mind that I wanted to change as a teacher. Previously, I was a very old school mindset of standing up at the front of the room and telling students all of this ‘valuable knowledge’ that they need, and then [students would] practice. And then I’d assess them and see how they’re doing. And then I was mad and frustrated when they weren’t doing so well. I thought there’s got to be a better way.”*

Specifically, Karlene has been working to provide students with formative feedback from herself as the teacher, from peers, and from students themselves.

Ultimately, the Harper Creek Learning Team hopes their model of learning, applying, and sharing will grow both the FAME program and the enactment of formative assessment practices in the district.

Tiffini Hurley describes her vision for FAME as “something that is in every building with a couple of Team leaders working in various departments to guide the [formative assessment] process of learning and talking about learning and just supporting students in whatever way possible.”

## Harper Creek Community Schools: Sustaining FAME Participation

### Persisting through the pandemic

Like all school districts, Harper Creek was profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and these effects took some toll on the district's FAME Learning Team.

"We've had some struggles during COVID because we don't meet as often as I'd like to, Laura conceded. "COVID hit people in different ways.... We lost some people from COVID because they were overwhelmed.... Some people just said, 'I can't do it. I'm struggling to just keep afloat.'"

Despite the challenges that the pandemic presented, Laura and the majority of her Team persisted on their formative assessment process journey. They continued to meet virtually (although not as often) and to learn about formative assessment through the FAME-provided professional learning sessions.

"March 2020 comes around we're like, 'Wow, what is happening?'" Tiffini Hurley recalls. "But I was invested so I just stayed with the process."

Far from adding yet another challenge during the pandemic, Tiffini found that her commitment to the formative assessment process actually helped her manage the shift to online instruction:

*"When I was meeting with a group of 20 to 30 students [online], and I could gauge their understanding in a formative way just through discussion or whatever they posted in the chat, I found it made my life a little easier honestly. Formative assessment felt like a lifeline to me at the time."*

Another reason for persisting through the many difficulties of the past two years is that Harper Creek educators on the FAME Learning Team view the pandemic and its aftermath as a crucial period in education and a chance to reimagine schooling in which collaborative work leads to conditions where, according to Shalen,

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***Harper Creek educators on the FAME Learning Team view the pandemic and its aftermath as a crucial period in education and a chance to reimagine schooling in which collaborative work leads to conditions where "all students are driving their education" through the formative assessment process.***

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"all students are driving their education" through the formative assessment process. In this way, formative assessment was "even more important during COVID" because of the extra demands on students.

Persisting in the pandemic, however, was not easy and Laura knew she had to be both strategic and empathetic. She was quick to extend grace and understanding during the pandemic and was careful not to push her Team too hard.

Laura has reason for optimism even for those FAME Learning Team members who left the Team in the past two years. First, Laura knows that the members who left are still having conversations about the formative assessment process with their colleagues, particularly those in their PLCs. Second, Laura hopes that Team members' departure might be temporary. She is holding the door open for them to return.

"I believe when the time is right, they'll get back in," Laura said. Tiffini Hurley agrees. She has already seen her colleagues re-ignite their interest in formative assessment.

"Those people who had showed interest [in being on the FAME Learning Team] at the beginning, but life circumstances [during COVID] pulled them away, still had interest," Tiffini describes. "They just had too much on their plates, but they were seeing the value participating had for those of us who stuck with it. People are getting re-interested or curious."

## Harper Creek Community Schools: Sustaining FAME Participation

### Next steps for Harper Creek

The formative assessment journey in Harper Creek continues. Laura Williams envisions a time when all Harper Creek educators partake in learning about the formative assessment process during their weekly PLC meetings, in professional learning sessions, in their collegial interactions, and through experimentation in their classrooms.

Harper Creek continues to pursue this vision in several ways. First, educators continue to engage one another through formal participation in the FAME Learning Team or more informally with their grade-level and school colleagues. Furthermore, led by Laura, Harper Creek is building district-level capacity both through cultivation of extant staff and through hiring of new educators who have expertise and interest in the formative assessment process. Third, Laura engages the Harper Creek superintendent and site principals in regular meetings to develop collective capacity in formative assessment and Cognitive Coaching proficiency.

“It’s really about sticking with it, and meeting people where they are in the process,” Laura concludes about their ongoing journey.

“Sticking with it” has taken a winding road that likely has more twists and turns in it as the journey continues. As Shalen King-Short notes, this steady and non-linear progress is part of a larger success story — a lesson she learned while involved for three years on a

FAME Learning Team as a teacher in her previous district. This experience helped her both in her work on Harper Creek’s district Team and in her interactions with teachers at her current school:

*“I think [prior experience] was really helpful because we’re puzzling through formative assessment and what a learning cycle looks like and what learning targets look like. In the back of my mind, I knew what it felt like, because I had just done it as a classroom teacher. And so, I knew it was going to be okay. We’re going to get through it to get to the larger outcome of being collaborative and having a really solid [formative assessment] process.... We get curious a lot around here and that is really how we are excelling and able to move forward.”*

This sentiment of curiosity-fueled enthusiasm along an uncertain road is shared by other members of the Harper Creek FAME Learning Team. Third-grade teacher Cheryl Bess noted:

*“Well, I don’t really know where it goes, exactly. I’m learning but I don’t really know the path. But I do see myself and our district continuing with it. I see us adding more teachers and making our Team stronger and just helping our Teams learn how to communicate together, plan together, and learn the ‘why’ behind what we’re doing. So we’re going to keep at it, and I’ll stick with it probably until I retire.”*

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## Harper Creek Community Schools: Sustaining FAME Participation

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How might FAME fit in with your broader efforts to provide teachers with quality learning opportunities? How does it fit in with other initiatives currently underway?
- How can your district strategically engage teachers in FAME and the formative assessment process to enhance teacher learning communities?
- How might you sustain involvement in FAME over time? What challenges to sustainability might emerge over time and how might you respond to these challenges?

### RELATED LINKS

[Michigan Great Lakes Virtual Academy: A Case Study in How Participation in FAME Cultivates Teacher Leadership](#)

This case study looks at teacher leadership within the FAME Learning Team at the Michigan Great Lakes Virtual Academy (MGLVA). It describes how the FAME program helps to build the teacher leadership needed for the enactment of the formative assessment process in an online environment.

[Why the formative assessment process matters](#)

This series of guides describes to specific groups of stakeholders the formative assessment process and how it makes a difference for students and their families, teachers, administrators, and district leaders.

[Learning Point: Online formative assessment strategies that help students with disabilities](#)

This one-page, sharable document from the Michigan Assessment Consortium describes how effective use of the formative assessment process can improve learning for all students, while being particularly helpful for students with disabilities. This is especially important for distance learning, which sometimes can feel to students like an endless “to-do” list with no particular goal in mind.

### About FAME Case Studies

The FAME Research and Development Team members **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 [lanejoh3@msu.edu](mailto:lanejoh3@msu.edu).**

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 several Guiding Principles in [Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan](#).

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***“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)***

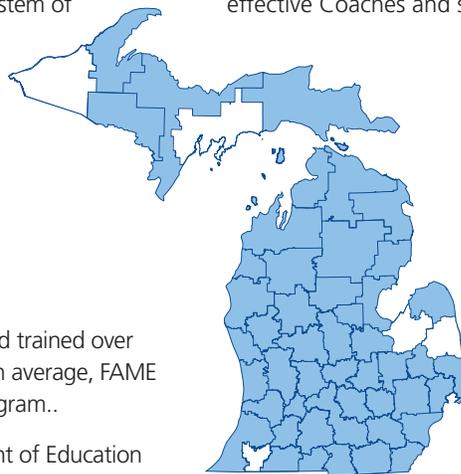
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FAME began in 2008 in order to address MDE’s goal to provide different approaches to reach high school students who were low achievers. MDE partnered with Measured Progress to develop and implement the FAME program. According to Kim Young, who directs 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.

Through 2023, FAME has supported and trained over 1300 coaches from across Michigan. On average, FAME brings in 100 new coaches into the program..

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



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

***“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

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## 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).