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Summary

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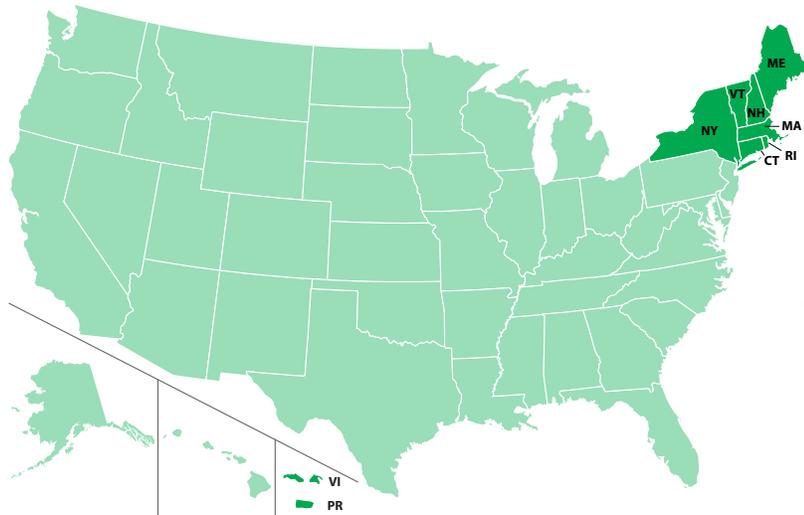
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# A descriptive analysis of state-supported formative assessment initiatives in New York and Vermont

**This study examines two state-supported formative assessment initiatives that promote a consensus definition of formative assessment endorsed by the Council of Chief State School Officers. It describes the primary components of the two initiatives and the strategies that state, district, and school leaders report using to support implementation of each initiative.**

Education policymakers and practitioners are increasingly interested in formative assessment, in part reflecting widespread reports in the education press about formative assessment’s potential for enhancing student learning. As schools and districts work to improve student learning outcomes, demand has grown for more information on state and local efforts to promote formative assessment and on the strategies that support its implementation.

A wide range of tools and practices are labeled “formative assessment,” and the broad use of this term has created uncertainty about just what it entails. To resolve some of this confusion, a national group of researchers, convened by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), arrived at a consensus definition of formative assessment as “a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching

and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes” (McManus 2008, p. 3). To provide insights into how this consensus definition of formative assessment has been put into practice, this study examines two state-supported initiatives (in New York and Vermont) intended to promote the CCSSO’s definition of formative assessment.

Two research questions guided this study:

- In Northeast and Islands Region states where state education agencies are supporting formative assessment initiatives, what are the primary components of each initiative?
- What strategies do state, district, and school leaders report using to support implementation of formative assessment initiatives?

This study relies on publicly available information and interviews to answer these questions. The publicly available information used includes websites and online documents such as official statements from state education agencies describing each initiative, progress reports on initiative implementation, interim or summary studies on each initiative, and documents from initiative leaders and their partners. This information was complemented

with semistructured interviews conducted with two state, two district, and two school leaders knowledgeable about each initiative.

The New York State Formative Assessment Technical Assistance Study was a pilot project in a large urban district that began in spring 2007 and ended in summer 2010. The Vermont Formative Assessment Project, launched in 2006/07, is an ongoing initiative that started with 9 schools the first year and expanded to 55 schools by 2008.

The study describes eight primary components for each initiative:

- *Goals.* Both initiatives aimed to improve student achievement through teacher use of formative assessment practices. Both initiatives also aimed to install, sustain, and spread formative assessment practices beyond pilot sites. Other implementation goals differed between the two initiatives.
- *Origins.* The two initiatives had different origins. The New York initiative emerged from a single district's request to the state education agency for support in developing capacity to train teachers in formative assessment. The Vermont initiative emerged from the state education agency's desire to help schools throughout the state adopt formative assessment.
- *Leaders and roles.* In New York, a single pilot district served as the primary leader of the initiative, while the state education agency supported the initiative financially and brought external technical assistance to the district. In Vermont, the state education agency led the initiative, drawing on an external vendor for training during the first year and on published training materials in subsequent years.
- *Use of external partners.* Both initiatives relied on external partners for support, but roles and costs differed. In New York, external technical assistance providers helped develop the initiative and provided support for the full three years of the initiative. In Vermont, an external vendor provided direct support only during the first year. The state built its capacity to sustain and expand the initiative in subsequent years without ongoing support from the external vendor.
- *Targeted participants.* The New York initiative focused on building the capacity of grade 4 and 5 teachers in formative assessment for math instruction during the first year, and participation was expanded to teachers in other grades in subsequent years. The Vermont initiative did not have a specific grade or content area focus.
- *Funding.* The New York initiative was funded through a three-year federal Mathematics and Science Partnership grant administered through the state. When the grant ended, so did the initiative. The Vermont initiative was funded by a variety of federal funds during its first year and by school and district funds in subsequent years.
- *Professional development.* Both initiatives provided initial and ongoing professional development to teachers in formative assessment. Training came from different sources, and each initiative provided

different levels of ongoing training and support to teacher leaders, principals, district officials, and state leaders.

- *Formal evaluation.* Both initiatives were formally evaluated. New York's evaluation efforts involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods, while Vermont's involved only qualitative methods. Early evaluation results suggested that both initiatives were successful in helping teachers gain a better understanding of formative assessment and incorporate formative assessment strategies in their regular classroom instruction. In Vermont, these findings encouraged state education agency leaders to continue the initiative and strategize scaling efforts.

State, district, and school leaders who were interviewed described a variety of strategies for achieving three implementation goals: getting teachers to adopt and integrate formative assessment practices into regular instruction, supporting and sustaining teacher use of formative assessment, and spreading or scaling use of formative assessment beyond pilot populations. Through analysis of the interview data, the study team identified nine sets of strategies that were present in both initiatives:

- Providing training by well known experts and credible evidence of the benefits of formative assessment.
- Creating a safe environment for teachers to try out new practices.

- Aligning initiative reforms with existing contexts and concurrent training efforts.
- Collaborating early with local leaders.
- Employing both voluntary and mandatory participation approaches.
- Providing ongoing training and support for teachers and others at different levels of the system.
- Establishing accountability and monitoring methods for sustaining initiative implementation.
- Building independent state and district capacity to sustain and spread teacher training.
- Harnessing enthusiasm at every level of the system to sustain and spread formative assessment.

This study details two state-supported initiatives that have worked to promote a consensus definition of formative assessment. Findings from this study offer exploratory ideas for future research and practice.

## Reference

- McManus, S. (2008). Attributes of effective formative assessment. Retrieved December 29, 2008, from <http://www.ccsso.org/publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=362>.