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How to Make Formative Assessment a Habit: Beyond the Classroom Practices

Spotlight on: building a culture that embraces formative assessment

- Making it easy for all teachers to develop key practices
- Supporting teachers' ongoing use of formative assessment
- Maximizing the instructional value of your communities of practice

In *3 Reasons Savvy District Leaders Prioritize Formative Assessment*, we shared several compelling motives for schools and districts to focus on classroom formative assessment practices. Fortunately, many teachers already incorporate these practices into their own instruction. Yet for educational leaders, a challenge often remains: how to make formative assessment a lasting *habit*—truly part of their school and district culture—rather than the initiative du jour or the passion project of a few teachers.

The organizations that support their teachers' consistent use formative assessment across grade levels and subject areas experience more than just increased student engagement. They also see greater teacher engagement and collaboration, which results in an enhanced instructional environment for all students. But how do they get there?

What the Experts Say

"Formative assessment takes place during the course of ongoing instruction to support student learning as it develops."

– Margaret Heritage, Jim Popham, Dylan Wiliam[1] (2012)

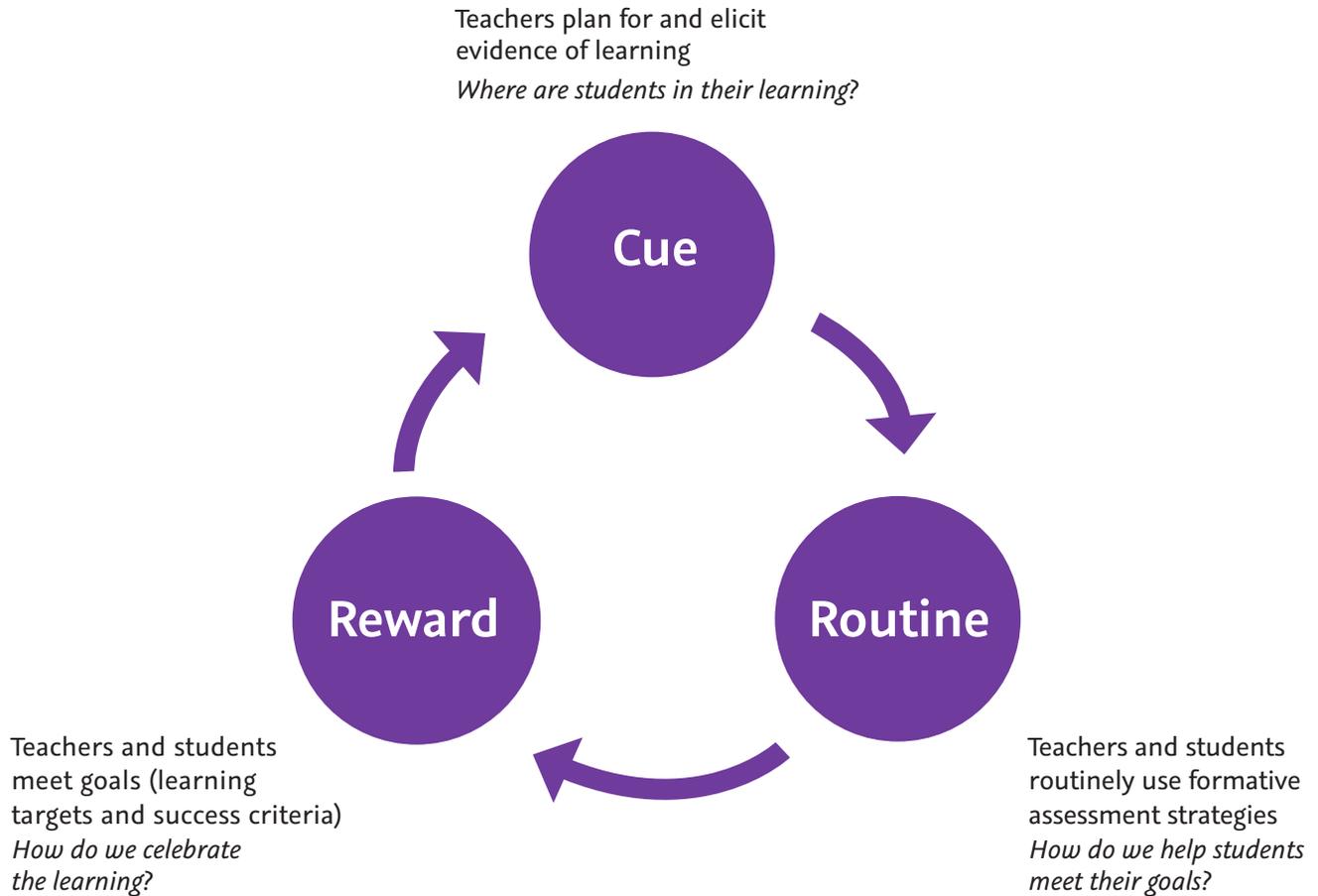*"Anyone observing the class should not be able to tell where instruction ends and assessment begins."*

– Leslie Lambert[2] (2007)

The Habit Loop

In an 1892 lecture series created especially for teachers, psychologist William James noted life "is but a mass of habits."[3] The same can be said for instructional practice—and educators know that changing old habits can be as hard as creating new ones. Leaders who succeed in implementing formative assessment practices school- or district-wide know that it starts with integrating the practices into every classroom's daily routines. They accept that creating cohesiveness across a school or district doesn't happen overnight, and look for ways to reinforce best practices.

Fortunately Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, breaks the habit creation process into a simple loop with three components: *cue*, *routine*, and *reward*. How does this play out in the case of starting to make formative assessment more of a habit in each classroom? First, teachers must recognize and plan for the *cues* of when to check for learners' understanding. This helps both the students and the teacher develop *routines*, which in turn leads both to see the *rewards* of increased learning and teacher efficacy.

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Cultivating a Formative Assessment Habit

Teachers plan for and elicit
evidence of learning
Where are students in their learning?

Cue

Reward

Routine

Teachers and students
meet goals (learning
targets and success criteria)
*How do we celebrate
the learning?*

Teachers and students
routinely use formative
assessment strategies
*How do we help students
meet their goals?*

"Habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result."

- The Principles of Psychology, William James (1890)

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Six Keys to Success

So what are some specific things leaders can do to support teachers in integrating formative assessment into their daily routines? What does it take? What does it look like? Dylan Wiliam[4] developed a list of five key process components to promote and support the development of classroom formative assessment. We've modified that list and added to it.

1. Choice. Ensure teachers have some autonomy in deciding which formative assessment practices and strategies to try implementing or how exactly to approach the learning. By providing choice, we can better respond to different teacher readiness levels.

2. Flexibility. Encourage teachers to make modifications to the strategies to make them their own so that they're as applicable and relevant as possible to their environment and for their students.

3. Small Steps. Learning is incremental and it takes time to change practice. To make lasting change, support teachers with the time, resources, and coaching they need as they transfer new learning into their daily routines.

4. Responsiveness. The information we collect is nothing until we act on it. Support teachers in not just eliciting evidence of learning, but then also making responsive adjustments to their instruction based on that data. It is also important for the teacher to teach students to be responsive in using their own data.

5. Collegial support. Provide teachers with both a space to collaborate with peers around formative assessment practices and the time to meet. This gives teachers opportunities to develop personal action plans, report back to a peer group about the result of implementing those plans, and reflect and receive feedback from colleagues who are addressing similar challenges.

6. Supportive answerability. Teachers, like any professionals, need to be held responsible for results AND they must be provided with the time and resources to accomplish meaningful change.

For school and district leaders, the combination of these six keys helps clarify who owns the learning (teachers) and who's responsible for the learning environment (leaders).

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A Community of Practice

Whether or not formative assessment becomes an organizational habit often depends on an organization's support of its teachers, as staff must be able to meet regularly to sustain their learning.

- **Before adding a new community of practice or deciding that there's no time for one, consider whether there's a way to rethink existing communities of practice or meeting times.** In most districts, some collaborative structures already exist to support teachers' learning. These include grade level teams, professional learning communities (PLCs), book study groups, whole faculty study groups (WFSGs), and data teams.

- **Be very clear about the purpose of your ongoing meetings in these groups.** PLCs have been widely implemented as a result of the work of the Dufours and Bob Eaker.[5] The original focus of these groups was student achievement data and common formative assessments. Over time, though, PLCs have been adapted to meet a variety of needs, including administrator and teacher learning.

  PLC meetings that are specifically carved out for formative assessment practice should stand out in two ways:
  1. only those using formative assessment strategies regularly—generally teachers—should attend (which has led Dylan Wiliam to call such groups Teacher Learning Communities or TLCs)

  2. the focus should be solely on teachers getting better at what they do every day: teaching

  These meetings are most fruitful if they start after all participants gain base-level knowledge of formative assessment content (e.g. in a workshop or common setting). Their purpose is to support teachers in *integrating* and *expanding* on that content. This ongoing collaborative process can cultivate a culture of learning that pushes, supports, and guides teachers to try new strategies, share triumphs and failures, and offer recommendations to one another in a non-evaluative environment. It takes time and effort, and research shows that this step is essential to long-term capacity building.[6]

- **Be specific about the numbers.** Some best practices include:
  1. keeping groups small enough for lively discussions, at about 6–10 participants

  2. identifying exactly what "regular" meeting times will look like, such as meeting every 4 or 6 weeks

  3. setting aside 75, 90, or 120 minutes to learn

  4. deciding if you'll want more shorter meetings or fewer longer meetings

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Now that you have some concrete ideas for making formative assessment a habit in your school or district, stay tuned for the next article in this series to hear how a district, a school, and a regional education agency are achieving their goals with formative assessment practice.

> *"Some teachers in my [TLC] group have been teaching 25 years. When the other teachers in the group see the experienced educators sometimes having difficulties, getting feedback and revising their teaching, everybody takes a deep breath and says, 'Oh, I can make mistakes too.'"*
>
> – Jay Preskenis, Teacher of AP Psychology and American Studies,
> Ashland School District, Oregon

> *"TLCs create ground rules and shared language, so it's not as intimidating to have peers or administrators observing in your classroom. I've even had a teacher ask me to record her lesson and give feedback on how she could improve. That's a welcome change."*
>
> – Dr. Linda Bertsch-Uveges, Former Assistant Superintendent,
> Sheffield-Sheffield Lake, Ohio

TRY IT NOW:

School and District Leaders: Take an inventory of all of the times teachers currently meet. Which of these could be converted to time focused on collaborating around formative assessment practice? Determine who will be involved. Will you start with a pilot effort, a content-specific focus, only volunteers, or all teachers? Be conscious of the use of formative assessment strategies during your walk-throughs. What are you seeing?

Teacher Leaders and Instructional Coaches: Audit current practices—yours and your colleagues'. Collect data during walk-throughs about what formative assessment currently looks like in your setting. Who's doing what, and with what regularity are they doing it?

Teachers: Choose to focus on one of the practices discussed in an earlier article, *4 Formative Assessment Practices that Make a Difference in Classrooms*. Explore for two weeks. What will you change about your current instructional practice? At your next meeting in a community of practice, share which strategies or tools you're using. What's working well with students? What would you like to try?

Everyone: Create a personal action plan. Identify one strategy you'll find easy to change over the next month. What's one thing you'd like to change that might require some support? What will you do differently or stop doing to make these changes? Tweet to **#NWEAformative** about your insights and a-ha moments!

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Enrich your ability to boost every student's engagement and ownership of learning: visit **NWEA.org/formativeassessment** to learn how we'll support your vision of student achievement and growth by helping you build and sustain classroom formative assessment practice at the school and district level.

1. Margaret Heritage, Jim Popham, and Dylan Wiliam. *Distinguishing Formative Assessment from Other Educational Assessment Labels*. (CCSSO, 2012), accessed April 1, 2016, http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/FASTLabels.pdf.

2. Lambert, Leslie. *Standards-Based Assessment of Student Learning: A Comprehensive Approach. Reston: National Association for Sport and Physical Education*, 2007.

3. James, Henry. "Chapter 8, "The Laws of Habit."." *In Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899.

4. Wiliam, Dylan. "Assessment: Learning Communities Can Use It to Engineer a Bridge Connecting Teaching and Learning"." *Journal of Staff Development*, 27, no.1 (2006), 16–20.

5. DuFour, Richard, and Robert E. Eaker. *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service, 1998.

6. Hattie, John. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Routledge, 2009.

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