



Leading Formative Assessment Change: A 3-Phase Approach

Spotlight on: formative assessment success stories

- What you **MUST** consider when conducting your needs assessment
- What to keep in mind to ensure a smooth implementation
- What it really takes to make a 'system change' when it comes to formative assessment practice

In the four previous articles in this five-part series, we:

1. explored [*why formative assessment is more relevant than ever*](#)
2. delved into [*four powerful classroom practices that dominate the research*](#)
3. talked about [*how to transform formative assessment into a lasting school and district habit*](#)
4. shared [*recommendations from leaders and teachers who are doing it well*](#)

In this final article, we'll recap the practical steps school and district leaders must take to support teachers in integrating formative assessment practices into daily instruction. To help make each step more concrete, we'll share several questions to ask yourself and your team during three critical phases.

The Three Phases to Implementing Formative Assessment Practice District-Wide

Deciding to make formative assessment the focus of your staff's professional learning can be a critical force in leading to effective teaching practices and improved student results.

Phase One: Needs Assessment

A needs assessment may sound daunting, but it's really centered around three specific responsibilities: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization around functions, structures, and processes. Addressing these three areas with your leadership team is the first step in planning for or expanding the use of formative assessment pedagogy district wide. Once you've had these conversations, you can start exploring what's going to help you be the most successful in this endeavor. Answering the following questions will allow you to clarify both purpose and process.

- **Start with why:** Why is your district/school interested in focusing on formative assessment? [*\(We shared some compelling reasons here\)*](#)
- **Identify the baseline:** What exposure to or experience with formative assessment does your staff have?
- **Find the fit:** How might formative assessment fit into your school or district assessment system and professional learning plan? How will it connect to, support, or extend work that has gone before?

- **Evaluate collaboration structures:** What opportunities exist to support the time needed for teacher collaboration, learning, and change? What structures might need to be adjusted or created to enable this?

If you're tempted to skip phase one, don't. As Jane Vella shares in her book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, the number one adult learning preference is a needs assessment, which enables participants to play an active role in what they will be learning.¹

Phase Two: Planning and Implementation

As with any change, particularly change to culture and/or practice, we want to *systematically* plan for success. When staff are exposed to new learning and try to implement it, they may be at different stages in the change process. For some it might be a first-order change, while for others it may be a second-order change. First order change is easy and makes sense, whereas second-order change may be more significant or disruptive (Watzlawick et al, 1974). Consider the fact that change like this takes time and that looking at a plan that ranges from three to five years may make more sense than trying to fit a desired change within a year-long plan. Recognize where all your stakeholders are in the change process and support them as they move through it. Once again, asking a few questions upfront can help you be more successful with your long-term planning and implementation.

- **Establish teacher collaboration time:** What configuration makes sense for your professional learning—existing, grade level, content, cross-grade, multi-disciplinary? Develop a detailed implementation plan that includes expectations for participants and how those expectations will be shared. Carving out and protecting the time for teachers to meet to support each other in this work is key to its successful integration. Account for classroom observations and formative classroom walk-throughs.
- **Build an implementation plan:** How will participation in this change effort be determined? Is it voluntary or mandatory? When will it happen? Think long-term when it comes to planning and ask how technology might be involved.
- **Select and support teacher leaders:** Who will be the teacher leaders for your building-level professional learning opportunities? What do they need to know before accepting the role? Will you *recruit*, *select*, or *invite*? Clear expectations coupled with success criteria will help teacher leaders gain the long-range vision for this work. Helping them build this effort into their own professional goals also supports them in being more focused and formative in their individual practice.

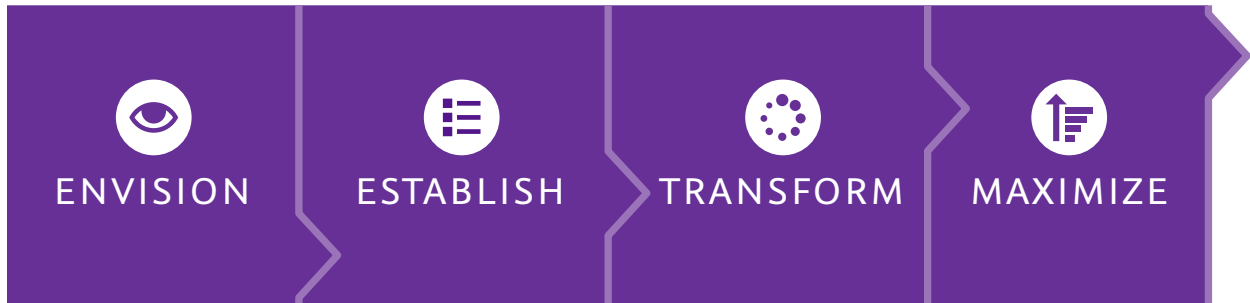
- **Build teacher interest:** What can you do to help teachers connect to this work? The proverbial “what’s in it for me?” question is something to consider as you reach out to early adopters. Involving teachers in the needs assessment is one way, as well as in the planning of the implementation.
- **Provide resources:** What materials and resources does each participant need in order to be successful?
- **Set success criteria:** How will you know the effort has been successful? How will you celebrate success? This may look very different in Year One versus Year Five.

Phase Three: Sustaining System Change

While teachers are the ones using formative assessment practices in their classrooms, school and district leaders play a substantial supporting role in making those practices *systematic*—and yes, it involves more than budgeting for professional development. Effective leaders understand the importance of formative assessment practice when it comes to continuous school improvement. Make a visible effort to show your commitment.

- **Be a learner and model:** How often do you get to participate in book studies or professional learning focused on a specific topic with your staff? Be the lead learner. Make time to learn *with* and *from* your staff so you can better understand the work of formative assessment and how you can support it. Model the strategies and techniques you’re learning. Demonstrate your use of formative assessment strategies when you can in meetings with your staff. Be transparent in how you collect data and use it to drive decisions on an ongoing basis (much like what you expect your teachers to do with formative data). While this may seem like a risk, it is no bigger risk than you are asking teachers to take, and it will go a long way toward building a shared organizational purpose and a culture that values formative assessment.
- **Conduct formative classroom walk-throughs:** What would it take for your current walk-through process to be more formative in nature? Moss & Brookhart explain that a formative walkthrough process should emphasize *learning inside of practice* and needs to combine four formative elements: 1) a professional learning target; 2) professional performances of understanding that enable the collection of evidence of professional growth; 3) clear and understandable look-fors (success criteria); and 4) feed-forward information.²
- **Plan for sustaining:** What needs to be in place to make the use of formative assessment *the way we teach* and not just *the latest initiative*? Having an acknowledged change process to help guide this work can be important in meeting the adult learners where they are. Planning for collecting data (evidence of learning) and using the data formatively to inform the plan is important. Advocating for and creating systems of support is crucial for embedding and sustaining the work.

Envisioning a balanced assessment system that supports classrooms where cultures of learning are established leads to the **establishment** of systems and environments that allow both of those to happen. When that culture of learning is supported by teachers integrating formative assessment minute-to-minute and day-by-day, students begin to **transform** into learners by growing their ability to be self-directed and self-regulated. These transformations empower students and teachers to **maximize** the learning, supported by evidence so that students achieve more and efficacy increases for all.



TRY IT NOW:

School & District Leaders: Complete a needs analysis using some of the questions listed earlier. Consider the *four core formative assessment practices*. Among those practices, identify where you have areas of strength, where there are opportunities for growth, and where there is the most teacher interest.

Teacher Leaders and Instructional Coaches: Review the data you've collected about the use of formative assessment strategies in your walkthroughs or conversations with teachers. What have you learned? How can you use that data to better support teachers and contribute to a needs analysis at the district or school level? Consider offering the teachers you work with regularly small-group work centered around a practice or various strategies.

Teachers: Meet with your grade-level or content team and share the results of your personal action plan. Use this opportunity to share, reflect, get, and offer feedback on your use of formative assessment strategies.

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. Vella, Jane. *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
2. Moss, Connie M., and Susan M. Brookhart. *Formative Classroom Walkthroughs: How Principals and Teachers Collaborate to Raise Student Achievement*. Alexandria: ASCD, 2015.