



Formative Assessment: False Pathway to Proficiency?

Properly implemented formative assessments can improve student learning, even if they don't measure proficiency.

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Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) more than five years ago, proficiency has been increasingly regarded as some sort of surrogate holy grail. Many U.S. educators have become preoccupied with getting more students to score proficient, or better, on state tests in order for their schools to be considered successful.

In the midst of the resulting frenzied pursuit of proficiency, formative assessment has entered the scene as an alleged savior. School leaders now assume that if teachers would formatively assess their students with sufficient frequency and fervor, then more students would earn proficient scores on state tests. This article addresses whether that assumption is warranted.

The Origins of Formative Assessment

Let's look more closely at why formative assessment is so popular these days. In 1998 two British researchers, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, published a widely read article in *Phi Delta Kappan* summarizing a meta-analytic review of 250 research studies dealing with the use of classroom assessment. Their meticulous review resulted in two conclusions: 1) If teachers use appropriate classroom assessments with sufficient frequency, students better learn classroom material; and consequently 2) those students would also earn substantially higher scores on external achievement tests, such as those mandated by NCLB.

It is not surprising that numerous U.S. school leaders, many of whom were desperate to avoid having their schools fall short of annual adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, began to tout formative assessment as a possible pathway to NCLB salvation. And unsurprisingly, given the emerging acclaim for formative assessment, a number of America's test vendors soon began to sell tests that were relabeled as "formative" because of the popularity of the approach.

Making Formative Assessment Effective

Because simply administering a test that is marketed as a formative assessment will not necessarily transform test scores, it is important to discuss the characteristics of formative assessment to ensure more positive outcomes.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has recently embarked on a major strategic initiative to explore formative assessment with the goal of familiarizing educators with its characteristics, and also helping educators to understand the necessary components to make formative assessment genuinely effective.

At an October 2006 CCSSO meeting in Austin, Texas, a collaborative of more than 20 states arrived at the following definition of formative assessment:

Formative assessment is 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.

This definition notes that formative assessment is a *process*, and not merely a particular kind of test. This process can be formal or informal—that is, the process may involve the use of formal tests, or it might rely on informal observations like teacher-student interviews.

The definition also notes that the process must supply as *feedback*, assessment-based evidence intended for use by *teachers and students to adjust ongoing teaching and learning*. In other words, formative assessment must supply information to teachers and students so

that adjustments can be made if necessary. This information needs to arrive while there is still enough instructional time remaining for adjustments to pay off.

The meta-analysis conducted by Black and Wiliam indicated that formative assessment works, as did the analyses of other reviewers. CCSSO's formative assessment initiative will help educators recognize which varieties of formative assessment are compatible with particular classroom assessments so that those educators won't be misled by test vendors. For example, many of the so-called "interim" or "benchmark" assessments now labeled as formative might really help improve state test scores. But there is currently no evidence to prove it.

My last point about the impact of formative assessment is not upbeat, but it is honest. There is solid research indicating that if formative classroom assessments are properly implemented, many students' scores on state exams will improve. Despite these improvements, however, many students are still certain to fail AYP targets. Regardless of this reality, properly implemented formative assessment will help students learn more, and will help students score higher on state tests. And that is a goal worth pursuing.

Reference

Black, P. and D. Wiliam. "Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment." *Phi Delta Kappan* 80 (1998): 139-148.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. To what degree do we use formative assessments to inform instruction?
2. What are the features or characteristics of formative assessments that are genuinely effective?
3. What are some of the formal and informal types of formative assessments in use in our school?
4. What classroom conditions must be in place in order for teachers to give students feedback in a timely fashion?
5. To what extent are the formative assessments we use aligned to specific performance standards?
6. What additional approaches do we need to implement in order to help our students reach their AYP targets?

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