

# A Formative Expe

A school's assessment journey will be marked by milestones—and a few bumps

*By Linda Gill and  
Christina Mulhollan Miller*





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The formative assessment process is a lot like a road trip. Before the journey begins, you must ask yourself three basic questions: Where are we now? Where are we going? How do we get there? The first two answers might be relatively clear at the outset; it's the "getting there" that requires constant calibration.

In other words, there will undoubtedly be milestones and speed bumps along the way. But as you go about the assessment journey, you'll discover powerful levers that improve student learning and change teacher practice.

As more teachers incorporate formative assessment into teaching practice, they want feedback on implementing the techniques. And principals who understand what formative assessment looks like in the classroom can confidently support teachers in their professional practice and improve student achievement.

## A Destination in Mind

In an effort to improve student achievement, the Charles County (Maryland) Public Schools set out to integrate effective formative assessment in classrooms districtwide. Our first task was to share that intent with educators throughout the district and determine our success criteria—what our teaching and learning would look like when we successfully reached our destination.

As a district, we committed to the strategies identified in *Embedding Formative Assessment*, a book by assessment experts Dylan Wiliam and Siobhán Leahy. The following five practices can serve as guides for principals looking to implement formative assessment in classrooms, and their presence can serve as indicators to evaluate teachers' progress in moving toward the use of a balanced assessment system.

**1. Share learning intentions and success criteria.** In a classroom focused on learning goals and success criteria, students can explain what they're doing and why. Teachers and students alike

## WHY SELF-ASSESSMENT WORKS

A huge part of creating a growth mindset in formative assessment is getting students to assess their own performance. According to digital learning and assessment expert Lee Watanabe-Crockett, self-assessment offers students and their teachers the following benefits:

- It encourages students to take more responsibility for learning.
- It is a highly effective critical thinking exercise.
- Students are usually frank and honest in their assessments of their own performance and that of their peers.
- It reduces the teacher's assessment workload.
  - It promotes deeper understanding of content topics and learning styles.
  - It lets students consider their decisions, reflect on their actions, and consider or plan future processes.



can express learning targets in understandable terms. Students evaluate work samples using checklists of required features, focusing on the learning goal and a definition of subject matter mastery. Instruction is a carefully planned journey, and the destination is clear.

**2. Elicit evidence of learning.** In a classroom that uses formative assessment, teachers collect evidence that students are learning what we want them to learn, just as an efficient traveler uses checkpoints along the route to determine where he or she is. This practice requires the teacher to engineer engaging tasks, discussions, and learning activities to identify what students know and to use that information to adjust instruction to keep students moving toward their learning targets.

**3. Offer feedback to improve learning.** Despite our best intentions, students don't always learn what we want. If they take an unscheduled detour, feedback that gets them back on the right road is critical. Teachers should model beneficial, specific feedback for students so they, in turn, can give feedback to their peers.

The value in feedback lies in the response of the recipient, so it should make the student work harder than the teacher. Feedback should align to content and learning intent. A traveler who has gotten off course takes time to get back on the highway; so, too, should students be given time to respond to feedback. This leads the student to understand the next steps to improvement.

**4. Peers help peers learn.** "If you want to go quickly, go alone, and if you want to go far, go together," an old proverb advises. Involving students in assessing each other's work and providing feedback can increase student achievement among all collaborators. A teacher who implements such a formative assessment strategy provides a safe climate in which risk-taking is acceptable as part of the learning process.

After the teacher models constructive feedback, students may be responsible for providing as much feedback to their peers as the teacher does. To ensure that student collaboration is meaningful, teachers provide protocols for designing feedback, also emphasizing group goals in classroom work while ensuring individual accountability.

**5. Develop the ability to monitor and self-assess learning.** Safe travel requires us to be aware of our current location and plan to move forward. In a formative assessment classroom, students set personal goals, and teachers plan activities to engage students in meeting them.

A growth mindset that promotes continuous improvement will require students and teachers to move beyond a score or grade and evaluate students instead on learning, self-improvement, and progress toward learning goals. Students who monitor their own learning can describe their own strengths and weaknesses; they can tell you why they know what they know and what gaps or roadblocks are in the way of their learning goals.

### Starting the Journey

Once we established these five strategies as success criteria, the district set out to share them. With the intention of adopting a systemwide understanding of the goal, we formed a district committee on balanced assessment, including parents, teachers, administrators, and the teachers' association. The committee built the assessment literacy of all stakeholders, and principals, vice principals, and district leaders benefited from a formative assessment seminar.

We created a full-time staff position to coordinate formative assessment efforts throughout the district. One of the person's tasks was to establish differentiated, job-embedded professional learning communities of teachers, administrators, supervisors, and content specialists seeking to improve their formative assessment practices through collaboration. Peer coaching helped staffers refine their skills.

Our effort to ensure universal implementation of formative assessment practices was

complicated by teacher turnover. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' *National Teacher and Principal Survey*, 15.7 percent of all U.S. teachers either changed schools or left the profession in 2015–16, and a majority of teachers had less than three years' experience. Our district struggles with that same churn.

Like many districts, we are retraining instead of retaining. Our teachers benefit from compensated pre-service orientation, teacher mentors, instructional leadership team support, paid professional learning opportunities, well-developed curricula, lesson seeds, curriculum maps, and pacing guides. But when we invest such resources in novice teachers, it is disheartening to see them leave the district.

When we develop professional learning experiences for our teachers, we establish clear expectations, use needs assessments to develop activities, provide principals with tools designed to give feedback, focus on collaborative planning, and encourage teachers to reflect on their practice. The same formative assessment strategies that promote student learning also provide effective professional learning for teachers' practice.

Our drive toward formative assessment didn't become an additional task for teachers


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but instead a sound pathway toward improving teaching and learning in our district. By developing clear expectations for teaching and learning and measuring them, providing opportunities for reflection, and promoting an atmosphere of collaboration, we improved both instructional practice and student achievement.

### Continuing Ahead

As we continue the journey toward improved teaching and learning, our district is making formative assessment a priority. We incorporated formative assessment strategies into district meetings to acquaint stakeholders with what those strategies look like—for example, giving principals student work samples to review at monthly meetings to build capacity for feedback and self-assessment. We are also adding learning targets and progressions (sequences of skills) to district curricula to incorporate that language into every teacher's instructional practice.

As an indicator of the district's long-term commitment to student and teacher progress through formative assessment practices, we have dedicated funding for teachers to observe their peers, provide feedback to one another, and collaborate on assessment practices. Added professional learning opportunities will help create a shift toward a culture of feedback for everyone, and we are working with an electronic platform to embed focused walk-throughs, targeted observations, and meaningful feedback into our educators' daily instruction.

Our formative assessment journey was never intended to be short. We are challenging ourselves to change our district into a goal-oriented, feedback-rich environment. And by establishing these strategies as wayfinding markers, we hope to continuously propel students and teachers to greater heights. 

**Linda Gill** is executive director of schools for Charles County (Maryland) Public Schools.

**Christina Mulhollan Miller** is coordinator of formative assessment for Charles County (Maryland) Public Schools.

ELEMENTS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT	ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing learning intentions and success criteria</li> <li>• Eliciting evidence of learning</li> <li>• Feedback that improves learning</li> <li>• Peers helping peers learn</li> <li>• Developing the ability to monitor and self-assess learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating clear expectations of success to teachers</li> <li>• Using data to plan and evaluate teachers' professional learning</li> <li>• Providing teachers with feedback on newly acquired teaching strategies</li> <li>• Designing opportunities for teachers to collaborate in learning communities</li> <li>• Developing teachers' ability to reflect and self-evaluate</li> </ul>