

Realizing the promise of formative assessment

Considerable effort has been spent setting standards, developing standardized assessments, and implementing school improvement plans all in the pursuit of increasing the number of students who reach standards set by the state. We must remember that conditions for students will only improve if teachers are given the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to help students learn and become better learners.

In 1998, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam conducted an extensive survey of the research literature that provided overwhelming evidence of the benefits of formative assessment in improving student learning. Assessment refers to all those activities used to collect evidence of student learning. It becomes *formative* only when that evidence is used to adapt teaching strategies to meet student needs.

Challenges to achieving the promise of formative assessment include the fact that many classroom tests still encourage superficial learning, despite the intent to measure understanding. Assigning grades is often prioritized over giving useful feedback to support learning. And, the practice of analyzing student work to discern learning needs is not systematically applied

to better understand student needs.

Administrators play a vital role in removing barriers to implementing formative assessment as a routine practice. Begin by considering a small group of teachers who are committed to formative assessment and can collaboratively address the challenges of bringing research to practice. Their initial work will lay the foundations for engaging other teachers building or district-wide.

Encourage schools that are engaged in formative assessment and share relevant evidence that schools may want to consider in light of existing practices. Over time, as expertise and evidence grows, earmark time and resources to train more teachers in formative assessment practices.

Be clear on the difference between assessing students summatively for external purposes and assessing students formatively to monitor and improve learning. Teachers and administrators must come to a shared belief about the role each of these forms of assessment play and how to put them in to practice for the benefit of their students.

"A focus on standards and accountability that ignores the processes of teaching and learning in classrooms will not provide the direction teachers need in their quest to improve."

-TIMSS Video Study

Quillayute Valley School District

Assessing the prior knowledge students already have, and discovering possible misconceptions which underlie that knowledge, are key to instruction. Quillayute Valley teachers have been learning how to understand what students already know by designing assessment probes as a pre-assessment tool to guide instruction. Staff have focused on Design Scenarios (EALR 3, Component 1), creating scenario-like assessments which correlate with the kits and curricula they use in their own classrooms.

Teachers have looked at actual student responses to WASL design scenarios, have scored these responses, and then have studied the state-scored responses of these specific questions. Teachers have said in no uncertain terms that scoring actual student responses has been one of the most important means in understanding what our state EALRs, GLEs, and the WASL itself are all about.

Questions to Consider

- ❖ How can formative assessment practices in your school support the students on the WASL, the state summative assessment?
- ❖ How can collaborative time be allocated for teachers to have regular opportunities to analyze student work, identify student learning needs, and redirect instruction based on those needs?

Mount Vernon School District

The NCOSP District Action Plan for the Mount Vernon School District specifically addressed the need for a better understanding of what students were learning in select content areas. Teachers and Administrators recognized the need for using that information to then guide instruction – formative assessment.

To that end, the district embarked on developing common formative assessments for the elementary science modules. Their committee began with Earth Science and will move into Physical and Life Science curricula. Jody Dylan, NCOSP Teacher Leader at the middle school level reports completion of assessments for the FOSS Earth History module at the middle school level in March. Craig Harpel, NCOSP High School Teacher Leader in Mount Vernon says, "it's not necessarily a pretty process, but the philosophy and groundwork is established so that we can move to the next step of making sure those common assessments really address what we should teach as well as what we do teach".

Questions to Consider

- ❖ How is evidence of student learning collected in your building and used to support instruction?
- ❖ What level of interest or expertise in formative assessment exists in your building that could be used systematically to help others?



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Calendar of upcoming events

Mar 30	LASER Strategic Planning Institute applications due (LASER)
Apr 16-May 4	WASL Testing!!
May 5	NCOSP 2007 Summer Professional Development Applications due (NCOSP)

Key references and resources

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Assessment and Classroom Learning,"
Assessment in Education, March 1999, p 7-74.

Page Keeley, Francis Eberle, and Lynn Farrin, "Uncovering Student Ideas in
Science: 25 Assessment Probes". 2005. NSTA Press.

James W. Stigler and James Hiebert, "Understanding and Improving
Classroom Mathematics Instruction: An Overview of the TIMSS Video
Study," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1997, 19-20.