What do we mean by Formative Assessment?

The Assessment Learning Network (ALN) will use a definition of formative assessment from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). This definition is also used by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in its Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) professional learning program. That definition is:

“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.” (CCSSO SCASS, 2007)

This definition of formative assessment comprises several key features:

- The formative assessment process is planned by teachers in advance, so teachers decide when they will check for student understanding and how they will do so; teachers also determine in advance what they will do if students have or have not learned what they have been taught.
- Both teachers and students engage in the formative assessment process.
- The formative assessment process provides immediate feedback to the teacher and to the students.
- Evidence of the students’ current level of mastery is used to adjust ongoing instruction and learning.
- The formative assessment process literally occurs during instruction – in today’s class or the next one. (MAC, 2015)

Formative assessment is a process

Black and William (2009) indicate that effective formative assessment practice includes the enactment of the following steps:

- Teachers and students establish a common understanding of a task’s learning goals.
- Teachers elicit student thinking.
- Students respond to teachers’ elicitation in ways that reveals their thinking.
- Teachers interpret students’ responses to make sense of where students are relative to goals for student learning.
- Teachers take action (e.g., trying a new strategy) to move students in the desired direction, on the basis of their interpretation.
- Teachers re-assess to measure the action’s success.

Thus, formative assessment is a process, not a “thing.” Thus, ‘common formative assessments’ (a term that actually describes

To learn more

Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do?  
Margaret Heritage, Kappan, 2007  
tinyurl.com/Heritage-Kappan

Formative Assessment: An Enabler of Learning  
Margaret Heritage, Better: Evidence-based Education, Spring 2011  
tinyurl.com/Heritage-Enabler

Re-Balancing Assessment: Placing Formative and Performance Assessment at the Heart of Learning and Accountability  
By Peter Hofman, Bryan Goodwin, and Stuart Kahl  
tinyurl.com/re-balancing-assessment

Formative Assessment: What it is and What it is Not!  
Sara Bryant, February 2010  

Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment  
Paul Black and Dylan William, Kappan, 2010  
tinyurl.com/zt8muw
interim or benchmark assessments) are not formative. Also, formative assessment is not a test, a quiz, nor an item bank.

**Why use formative assessment?**
Research has shown the use of formative assessment has several positive impacts. It serves to:
- Improve student learning (e.g., Black & William, 1998; Heritage, 2013)
- Increase student involvement (e.g., Brookhart, 2013)
- Help teachers to be more reflective about students’ understandings (Furtak, 2012)
- Support students in identifying barriers to learning (Marshall & Drummond, 2006)

**Three guiding questions in formative assessment**
Research by Sadler (1989), Hattie and Timperley (2007), and Gotwals, et al (forthcoming) indicate that formative assessment practices may be categorized into three large observable-practice dimensions, structured around key questions that teachers and students should ask themselves as they move through the learning process:

1. Use of learning targets and goal setting — Where are we (teacher and students) going?
2. Evidence of student understanding — What does the student now understand?
3. Closing the gap/responding to students — How do we (teacher and students) get to the learning target?

1 Sadler (1989) delineated three necessary components of feedback: (1) the standard, which is to be achieved, (2) the actual level of performance, and (3) how to go about closing the gap. Building on this, Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggested that “effective feedback must answer three major questions asked by a teacher and/or a student: Where are we going? (What are the goals?), How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?), Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?) (p. 86).

2 Source: Formative Assessment Learning Guide (forthcoming)

**FAME COMPONENTS AND ELEMENTS**
The components and elements to be used in the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) program in 2017 and beyond are a re-conceptualization of the components used previously in FAME. The five components and thirteen elements of the 2017 FAME program are organized by the three guiding questions described. These indicate key steps in the formative assessment process.

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