

# Formative Assessment

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION



**F**ormative assessment is a purposeful process that provides teachers and students with descriptive feedback concerning students' literacy. Teachers use formative assessment to inform instruction. When engaging in formative assessment, teachers and students share responsibility for learning. The International Reading Association supports formative assessment as an integral component of a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction and assessment.

## Background

Black and Wiliam (1998) published an analysis of research that has become a seminal work on formative assessment. They note that formative assessment consists of the varied daily interactions between students and teachers that provide feedback to be used by the teacher to differentiate instruction and by students to enhance their learning experiences. Shepard (2005) suggests that formative assessment is a collaborative process in which teacher and student negotiate how to improve learning.

Although the term *assessment* is used, formative assessment is not a process that is associated with grading. Rather, it is a natural, day-to-day component of teaching and learning. Formative assessment is characterized by purpose, collaboration, its dynamic nature, descriptive feedback, and continuous improvement (McLaughlin & Overturf, 2013a, 2013b).

- *Formative assessment is purposeful.* It provides information that can be used in setting learning goals and understanding how well those goals are being met.
- *Formative assessment is collaborative.* Both teachers and students play active roles in formative assessment.
- *Formative assessment has a dynamic nature.* It is an active, ongoing process that provides multiple insights into student learning. It occurs during teaching and learning, is interwoven into lessons, and accommodates the nature of the lesson.
- *Formative assessment provides descriptive feedback to teachers and students.* Teachers use descriptive feedback to adjust their planning and teaching. Students use feedback from teachers to improve their learning.
- *Formative assessment supports continuous improvement.* Teachers and students use the descriptive feedback to make meaningful adjustments in teaching and learning. Formative assessment happens throughout the school day and the school year as teachers teach and students learn.

## Formative Assessment Frequently Asked Questions

A number of questions about formative assessment have been raised by both teachers and school administrators. The following queries and responses are among those frequently discussed.

**Q:** *How can I best use formative assessment in my teaching?*

**A:** Formative assessment helps students to monitor their learning, take responsibility for improving it, and develop as self-sustaining learners. It is an integral part of everyday teaching. The references and resources listed at the end of this statement provide many specific suggestions about how to make formative assessment a part of daily instruction in literacy and other areas of the curriculum.

**Q:** *Our state test happens once a year, and we administer interim literacy assessments every two months. Should we give the formative assessments once a month or once a week?*

**A:** Many schools now administer periodic (interim) benchmark measures as well as required summative, state testing of reading and writing. Formative assessment can be considered the third component of an overall, comprehensive approach to literacy assessment. Formative assessment is an ongoing process, not a specific instrument or something conducted at a particular time. The ongoing feedback that results enables teachers and students to monitor and make adjustments to teaching and learning in relation to specific standards of achievement.

**Q:** *How does formative assessment relate to the Common Core State Standards?*

**A:** Formative assessment helps educators understand student progress in relation to the Common Core State Standards and the rigor they demand. For example, as students read texts of increasing difficulty and complete tasks that involve higher order thinking, formative assessments can be used to measure students' progress. Formative assessments inform teachers' ongoing efforts to help students reach new standards and higher levels of achievement. Assessment of students' needs and strengths occurs throughout reading and learning. Formative assessment is uniquely positioned to meet this need.

## International Reading Association Recommendations

The International Reading Association recommends that teachers and school administrators examine their policies and practices regarding formative assessment to optimize its potential as an integral part of a comprehensive schoolwide assessment program. Toward that end, classroom teachers and other school leaders first acknowledge the value of formative assessment. Collaboratively, they then identify best practices and formulate policies that will guarantee the implementation of formative assessment. This shared vision enables the implementation of the following IRA recommendations for policy and practice.

### Teachers should

- Use formative assessment to inform instruction.
- Use information and conclusions gathered from formative assessments when modifying curriculum and/or curriculum timetables, differentiating student tasks and/or materials, making intervention referrals, and formulating students' education plans.
- Always use formative assessment information as part of decisions about student progress and student retention.

### District/school leadership should

- Actively support teachers' use of formative assessment.

### District/school leadership and teachers should

- Develop a clear role for the use of formative assessment in instruction.
- Provide the professional learning experiences necessary for bringing faculty to the point of using formative assessment in accordance with the principles and practices described in this document.

The International Reading Association believes that using formative assessment in accordance with the principles, practices, and recommendations outlined in this document will contribute considerably to student literacy achievement and personal growth.

## REFERENCES

- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.
- McLaughlin, M., & Overturf, B.J. (2013a). *The Common Core: Teaching K–5 students to meet the Reading Standards*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- McLaughlin, M., & Overturf, B.J. (2013b). *The Common Core: Teaching students in grades 6–12 to meet the Reading Standards*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Shepard, L.A. (2005). Linking formative assessment to scaffolding. *Educational Leadership*, 63(3), 66–70.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Afflerbach, P. (2012). *Understanding and using reading assessment, K–12* (2nd ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2007). *Checking for understanding: Formative assessment techniques for your classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2011). *The formative assessment action plan: Practical steps to more successful teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Heritage, M. (2010, September). *Formative assessment and next-generation assessment systems: Are we losing an opportunity?* Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved August 3, 2012, from [www.ccsso.org/Documents/2010/FormativeAssessment\\_Next\\_Generation\\_2010.pdf](http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2010/FormativeAssessment_Next_Generation_2010.pdf)

IRA offers a range of resources to support its members and other professionals in their work with all learners. See particularly the IRA website area on "Resources by Topic" ([www.reading.org/Resources/ResourcesByTopic.aspx](http://www.reading.org/Resources/ResourcesByTopic.aspx)). See also IRA position statements on critical issues in the field ([www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/AboutIRA/PositionStatements.aspx)).

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