

Assessments that Influence Learning

by Anne Kel-Artinian

When I meet people and tell them that I work for a K-12 assessment company, I get responses that range from those who politely change the subject to those that express extreme displeasure. I attribute this to the highly publicized backlash against assessment. I sometimes fear that when it comes to assessments in schools, we could be at a “throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater” moment. And if that happens, we will lose the most effective tool that we have for improving student learning: formative assessment¹.

Formative assessment began getting serious attention in 1988 when Paul Black and Dylan Williams published their extensive meta-study of empirical research in classroom assessment. As a result of their analysis, they argue that when formative assessment is appropriately used, it improves student learning in a significant way. Evidence from the meta-study indicates that formative assessment leads to the largest gains in student learning among any intervention ever reported.²

It is important for those of us who value the power of formative assessment to counter this current negativity about assessment with extreme enthusiasm, and that is the purpose for this paper.

1 What is the formative process?

Broadly speaking, formative assessment is assessment that influences the focus of instructional activities that are currently taking place rather than assessment that determines the effectiveness of past instruction. James Popham puts it this way:

Formative assessment is a planned process in which teachers or students use assessment-based evidence to adjust what they're currently doing.³

Margaret Heritage elaborates the definition by introducing the idea of a feedback loop, which highlights and in turn raises the issue of student ownership of learning:

The essential purpose of formative assessment as a practice is to move students' learning forward while their learning is still in the process of developing. This stands in contrast to other forms of assessment, which evaluate learning after a period of teaching. Formative assessment practice operates as a feedback loop in which both teachers and students can play active, distinctive, yet complementary roles in enabling learning by consistently working to build and

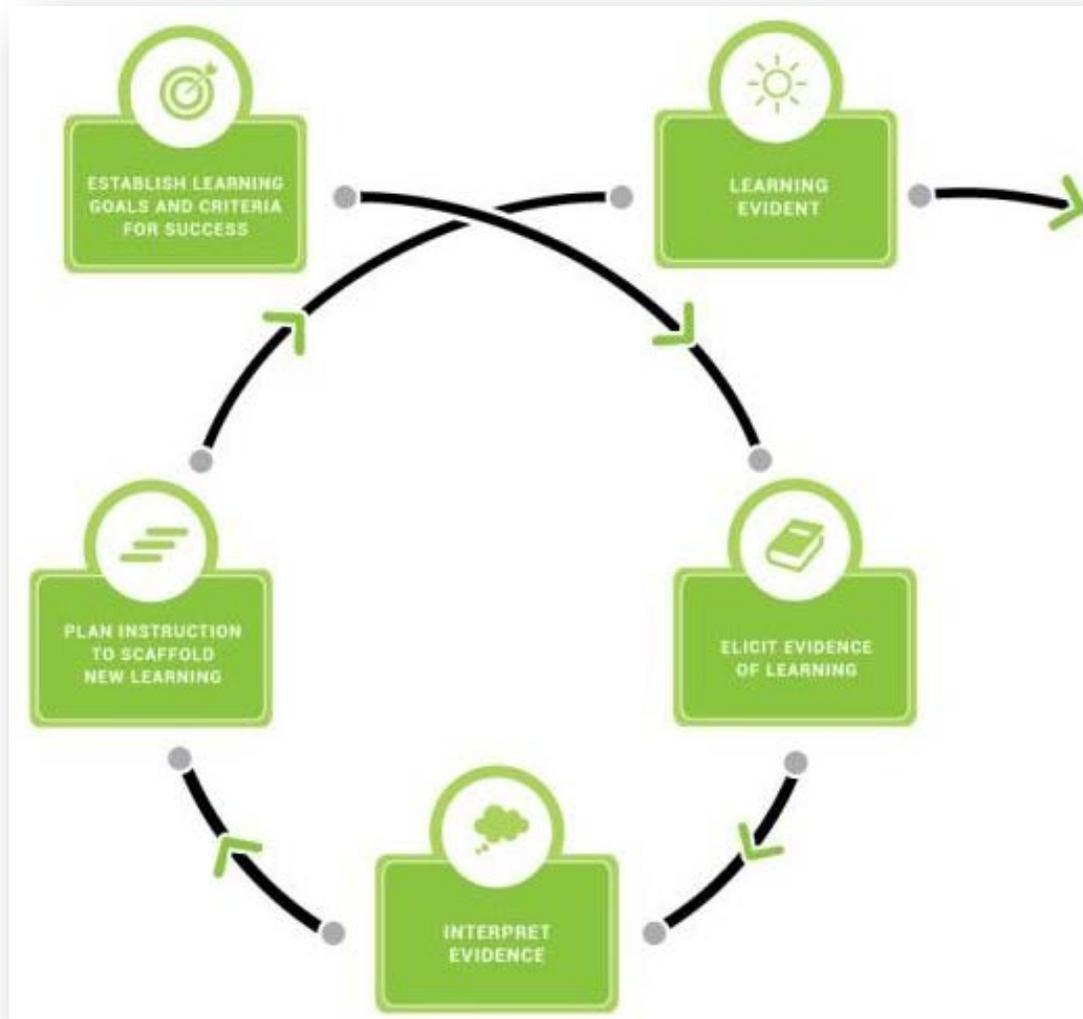
¹ Paul Black and Dylan William, “Assessment and classroom learning,” *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 5, no.1 (1988a): 7–73. quoted in James Popham, *Transformative Assessment* (Alexandria VA: ASCD, 2008) chapter 1.

² Paul Black and Dylan William, “Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no.2 (1988b): 139– 149. Quoted in James Popham, *Transformative Assessment*, chapter 1.

³ James Popham, *Transformative Assessment*, chapter 1.

consolidate student understanding and skills during the course of a lesson.⁴

From both Popham’s and Heritage’s work has emerged the idea that formative assessment is not necessarily a test; it can be an observation, a work project, a discussion. And formative assessment is most certainly not a test administered without instructional follow up. Finally, formative assessment is a process by which teachers elicit evidence of learning and modify instruction based on that evidence. This process is modeled in this illustration. Note that the nature of the model is such that the loop can be recursive based on the outcomes for students.



Using this definition, it is clear that classroom teachers are the primary owners of formative assessment. They are the ones who adjust instruction and are often the ones who compose the assessment. This leads to the question, can district-level interim assessments serve formative purposes? You are going to

⁴ Margaret Heritage, “Formative Assessment: An Enabler of Learning” *Better: Evidence-based Education*, Spring (2011): 18-19. http://www.bestevidence.org/word/Better_Spring_2011.pdf

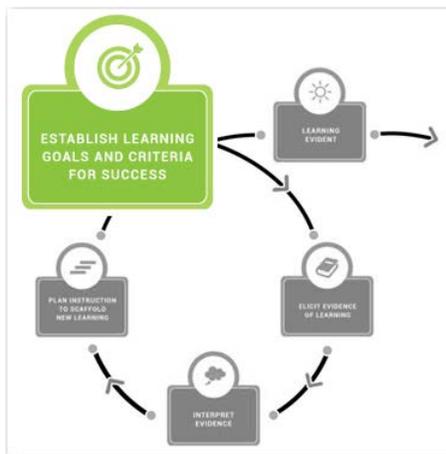
hear a lot of people argue vigorously that this is not possible. The prime argument for this is that these assessments are usually designed for evaluative purposes (for example to gather evidence of program effectiveness) and are therefore not tuned to what is going on in the classroom.⁵

While this may be true of state assessments and other standardized assessments, it does not have to be true of district interim assessments that are a component of a balanced assessment program. In fact, it is a growing reality that many districts are mindfully creating them to provide direct evidence that teachers can use to modify their instruction.

2 Creating Assessments that Influence Learning

2.1 Set your purpose to inform instruction.

Districts that intend for their teachers to use interim assessment for formative purposes need to keep that in mind from the outset of their planning. Having formative goals will influence choices like which standards and concepts you want to address on each interim assessment. For example, your district Algebra I teachers have developed a common scope and sequence. In this scope and sequence, *relationships between quantities and reasoning with equations* is covered in the first part of the year. *Quadratic functions and modeling* will be covered at the end of the year. To honor this common scope and sequence, the district interim assessment for the first part of the year should not cover *quadratic functions and modeling* but instead focus on *relationships between quantities and reasoning with equations*. And vice versa.



In other words, when district interim assessments mirror the scope and sequence for a grade or course, they are much more likely to yield information to inform instruction. This way, we use the scope and sequence **to help establish learning goals and criteria for success** and make district interim assessments part of the formative process.

2.2 Develop assessments to meet the purpose of informing instruction.

Once you have established your goals and targeted the concepts or standards you want to assess on each interim assessment, continue to support the formative learning process by using content that will **elicit evidence of learning**. To do this, it is essential to use high-quality assessment content. You can



⁵ Marianne Perie, Scott Marion, Brian Gong and Judy Wurtzel, *The Role of Interim Assessments in a Comprehensive Assessment System*, Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2007. <https://www.achieve.org/files/TheRoleofInterimAssessments.pdf>

tell if assessment content is high quality if items and tasks clearly assess what they claim to assess. Additionally, high-quality assessment content meets requirements for rigor that are either explicitly or implicitly written into a standard. So for example, a reading item for grade 4 can only be rigorous enough if the text associated with that item meets grade 4 text complexity requirements. If the text is too easy, then the item cannot meet the rigor of the standard.

Assessment content with these characteristics can only exist when it is written specifically for the standards. When items do not clearly assess a standard, they are likely re-aligned from legacy standard sets.

While it is likely that a single item cannot address the full range of a standard, a group of questions that all assess the same concept, standard, or target should represent range of complexity. The cognitive complexity of an item is often described as its Depth of Knowledge or DOK. If an assessment contains three items that are all DOK1, multiple choice items, then those items are probably not addressing the range of learning expected for the standard.

2.3 Schedule time for teachers to review assessment results and consequently modify instruction.

Even if you have built your assessment to meet formative goals, you will not succeed in addressing those goals if your teachers don't have time and training to examine student performance and make instructional choices accordingly. The following are some suggestions for improving the formative value of district interim assessments.

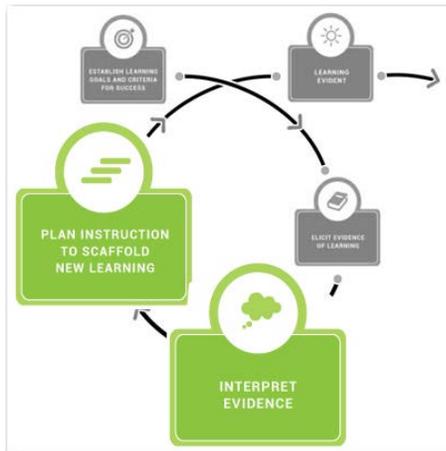
Don't let district-level goals overshadow formative goals. Because interim assessments are most often developed and administered at the district, examining the data is often most focused at the district level. This important work often reveals areas in the curriculum that need strengthening in a

In the policy brief, "The Role of Interim Assessments in a Comprehensive System Assessment System," Achieve, The Aspen Institute, and The National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessments provide these general guidelines about selecting content for interim assessments that inform instruction:

- Not all multiple-choice
- Provision for qualitative insights about understandings and misconceptions and not just a numeric score
- Immediate implications for what to do besides re-teaching every missed item
- Rich representation of the content standards students are expected to master
- High quality test items that are directly linked to the content standards and specific teaching units
- A good fit within the curriculum so that the test is an extension of the learning rather than a time-out from learning
- A good fit with curriculum pacing so that students are not tested on content not yet taught
- Clear reporting that provides actionable guidance on how to use the results
- Validation of the uses of and information provided by the assessment
- Administration features (speed, availability of normative information, customization, timing flexibility; adaptive) that match the assessment purposes
- Professional development for teachers

systemic way, groups and subgroups that are being underserved, schools that stand out in terms of program improvement, and so on.

But because of the importance of this district-level work, initiatives to engage teachers in examining assessment results to improve classroom instruction are often overlooked, however unintentionally. The solution is here is obvious, but it bears stating: be intentional in communicating that district interim assessments must serve formative goals, and make sure that teachers are prepared to make this happen.



Provide adequate professional development for teachers to form PLCs or data teams. We often assume that teachers know how to interpret and use assessment data to inform their instruction. But even veteran teachers are often puzzled about how to pause the curriculum to reteach or differentiate to meet the varied needs of their students. So once you have communicated that district interim assessments serve formative goal, be sure that teachers have opportunities for professional learning and the schedule flexibility to put what they learn into practice.

Take advantage of technology that provides timely data.

There is an historic expectation that it takes time --weeks or even months-- for data to be available from an assessment that is administered district wide. When it takes a long time to get the data, the instructional impact of that data is diminished significantly. However, this expectation is outdated in an age where assessment platforms yield almost instantaneous results that can be reported on in ways that serve both district-level needs and the needs of classroom teachers. Most assessment administration platforms have robust reporting options that teachers can access directly to provide information about student strengths and weaknesses. These reports are almost always available as soon as an assessment has been administered so teachers can take immediate steps to plan instruction based on results.

2.4 The proof is in the learning.

Returning to our original premise that using assessments formatively is the most effective form of improving student learning, districts can build interim assessments to serve these purposes. When they do and when they show results in terms of student learning, they can address concerns about over testing with confidence.

