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ASSESSMENT Q&A

How to Use Formative Assessment to Accelerate Learning



By [Sarah D. Sparks](#) — April 24, 2023 ⌚ 6 min read



— Adam Niklewicz for Education Week

Teachers usually can't use standardized tests to accelerate students' learning. The tests are often too general and the results too slow in coming to help teachers make daily instructional decisions. To keep students on pace with grade-level content while also filling in holes from disrupted learning, it's crucial for teachers to integrate daily measures of student understanding—often known as formative assessment.

Chase Nordengren, the lead researcher in effective instructional strategies at the assessment group NWEA, studies the use of formative testing in the classroom. He spoke with Education Week about how teachers can measure understanding in ways that are less stressful to students and better for accelerating learning.

The interview below has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

How do you distinguish between diagnostic assessment versus formative assessment? And how should teachers be using those two?

I personally tend to get nervous about the word “diagnostic,” because I think it often implies a level of certainty and a level of finality. We’re not diagnosing a disease; we are identifying what is right now a gap of understanding that we can help to fill.

I think it is important to think about formative assessments as not just those formalized pencil-and-paper forms, but all of the strategies that teachers employ in the classroom to understand, in the moment, what students want to do, what they’re ready to work on next, and how to best provide them with the kinds of instruction or the approaches that will help get them there. Formative assessment is the linchpin of all that.

How are teachers using formative assessments now for accelerated learning?

One of the things that we are seeing a lot of is teachers thinking about how to put students into smaller, just-in-time groups, spending a class period that would otherwise be focused on whole-group instruction focused primarily on small-group instruction. One of the things you can do within the context of that is you can start with a whole-group lesson where students are being delivered the same content or perhaps the grade-level content. That 10 or 15 minutes, depending on how it’s designed, gives teachers an opportunity to really quickly assess where students are in their understanding of that material and know where it’s necessary to make last-minute decisions about whether to put them in the group that is focused on reinforcing some of those skills.

How should teachers decide which prerequisite skill they need to test for in a given lesson?

So, when the first week of school comes around, or you have a new set of students, you need to get a general understanding of what they know, in a content domain. Where the formative assessment part of the strategy comes in is taking that general understanding, combining it with what you know about what your particular scope and sequence is going to be, and producing targeted data points throughout instruction to understand, OK, in order to access the learning, what are we planning for the class today, what are the fundamentals that students are going to need? And what are some of the gaps that students might have in those fundamentals that I can sample? What do I know, based on the testing that I've done, about which students are likely or unlikely to be able to access that? And most importantly, what can I ask right now, that will confirm for me which students are ready and which students need support in which areas? I realize it's a very complicated answer. It's a very complicated practice. But I think a lot of it comes down to balancing all of those sources of information.

What sort of training do teachers most need to learn how to manage that balance?

There is a level of instinct, and a lot of the teachers I've talked to don't necessarily name their formative assessment practices as formative assessment. In their minds, it's just good to check in to see where kids are. I think professional learning can best help in this area by providing a context and a set of resources for reflection that will help teachers get that process more finetuned and regular. Teachers can often feel overwhelmed, especially when the process is complex. They can often feel like they are having to reinvent the wheel every week with every new set of content.

How is formative assessment different in the context of accelerated learning than it was before the pandemic?

Before [the pandemic], we were talking about formative assessment as a way to enhance the experience for students who have deviated from the norm in some way. Now, the norm is students are everywhere.

In a recent Department of Education survey, the average superintendent says half of the students in their district are entering below grade level. You could be looking at grade with students coming in at four or five or six different grade levels.

How does student self-assessment work with the teacher

assessment?

The reason self-assessment is so important comes back to what we've gathered in the last several years from the fields of cognitive science, about the ways that people learn, and the central importance of metacognition, of being able to think about how you learn as an individual and how you can learn better. That's not a process that comes to students innately. We have to reinforce it for them by giving them the opportunity to think about what they've learned, and to be able to tell us ultimately what they need in order to be more successful.

[Student self-assessment] can look as simple as asking a student to do a written reflection or even an oral reflection on what they've focused on—What excited you? What stuck out the most? What were some of the things that you had challenges with?—to build different levels of complexity beyond [the lesson itself]. Teachers can supplement that strategy with asking students to check their work: [for example,] particularly in English language arts, building in that process of rewriting as writing.

How do teachers find time to do more assessment in their normal classes?

Formative assessment can be a time saver and time optimizer, if you use it to either replace more formal assessment [or] replace the period of not knowing where students are and what they're ready for with finding the fastest and most efficient opportunities to understand what students know now and making in-the-moment teaching decisions.

If you think about, for example, a typical lesson [in] early elementary language arts. Often, students will be focused on the same set of texts throughout a week and teachers who are doing the same patterns for their week. So Mondays will always be an introduction to the text. Tuesdays will always be reinforcing key vocabulary. Having that routine allows teachers to make more regular formative assessments. On the Monday that you introduced the text, you are giving students a chance to predict what's going to happen in the story. As you walk around the room, each of those times, you start to develop habits of what you're listening for to understand, OK, this student is ready to tackle the next level of complexity on Tuesday, or that student might need some reinforcement and some fundamental skills. The advantage of that structure is, it gives you an opportunity to build some routines around what you're looking for and listening for in those activities to understand where individual students are.



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