



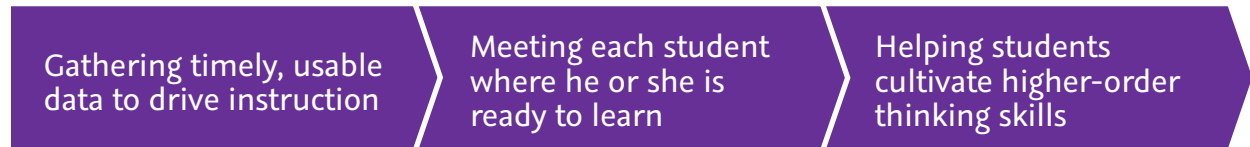
# 3 Reasons Savvy District Leaders Prioritize Formative Assessment

**Spotlight on:** the what and whys of formative assessment

- What it is
- Why it's more relevant than ever
- Why savvy leaders—and teachers—prioritize classroom formative assessment

Across the U.S., the number of districts implementing college and career-ready performance standards continues to grow—a fact that helps explain educators’ increasingly determined search for effective instructional support.

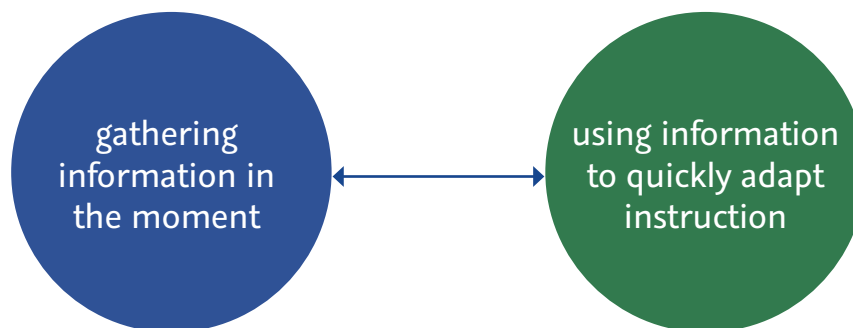
Common educator challenges center around three key issues:



As teachers continue to seek ongoing ways to personalize their instruction to meet individual student learning needs, many are finding that formative assessment is a critical piece of the solution.

## What we’re talking about when we use the term formative assessment

While broadly defined as “students and teachers continuously gathering evidence of learning to adapt what happens in the classroom,” formative assessment focuses on two main things: teachers and students gathering accurate information in the moment, and teachers using that information to quickly adapt instruction. Ongoing formative assessment practice strategically transforms both students and teachers into decision-based data collectors.



Educators whose focus includes classroom formative assessment practice find it’s a fast, proven, sustainable way to collect and act on data. It allows them to pinpoint what students are ready to learn, match their teaching strategies and activities to student needs, and help students act as instructional resources for one another.

## Why formative assessment is more relevant than ever

Research suggests educators are more likely to succeed in meeting the challenges above if their environments include a balanced assessment system that provides valid and reliable formative, interim, and summative data.

Formative assessment has a demonstrated track record of improving teacher practice, student engagement, and student outcomes—and today, it's more relevant than ever, tying in well with key district priorities.

- **College and Career Readiness Standards.** Teachers are expected to instruct students on how to think at deeper levels, problem-solve effectively, ask good questions, and take ownership of their learning. When students are engaged through the use of formative assessment practices, these skills are developed and enhanced.
- **RTI.** Teachers are being asked to gather evidence of learning to ensure the effectiveness of instruction for each student. Using formative assessment practices on an ongoing basis supports teachers in meeting this objective.
- **Individualizing Instruction.** Teachers must tailor instruction based on students' readiness to learn in order to ensure their progress. This is a part of gathering evidence by using formative assessment strategies so instruction can be adjusted appropriately.



Formative assessment has a demonstrated track record of improving teacher practice, student engagement, and student outcomes.

## Why savvy leaders—and their teachers—prioritize classroom formative assessment

When we look at key findings from the research on classroom formative assessment practice, it's clear formative assessment aligns with educators' goals of helping each student learn and grow.

**GOAL #1:**  
Enable better instructional decisions.

**SOLUTION:**  
Collect and apply evidence of learning in the moment.

P.L. Peterson and his colleagues<sup>1</sup> found that teachers who questioned students in order to better understand the students' problem-solving processes could better adapt and plan instruction to meet those students' immediate learning needs (as compared to teachers who did not use those techniques). Since then, research has continued to find the process of collecting evidence of learning to be an effective learning tool.

Summative assessments yield data too late to inform current-year teaching practice. Interim assessments are more useful for helping teachers personalize learning throughout the year, since they provide timely data before and after instruction. Formative assessment, however, is the only type of assessment that can offer teachers the most timely data of all: during instruction, when “the primary purpose of assessment is not to measure but to further learning.”<sup>2</sup>



Formative assessment is the only type of assessment that can offer teachers the most timely data of all

## GOAL #2:

See a measurable difference for students.

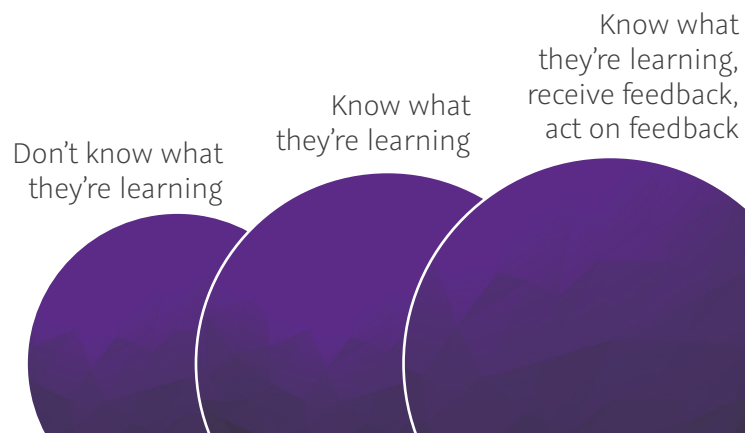
## SOLUTION:

Give students quality feedback.

Research shows that when teachers provide quality feedback, and students act on that feedback, learning improves. Debra Pickering's work tells us that when students know what they are learning, their performance, on average, has been shown to be 27 percentile points higher than that of students who do not know what they are learning. If, in addition, they receive effective feedback from their teacher and the opportunity to act on that feedback, the advantage can be as high as 37 percentile points—about a standard deviation on the ACT, or more than a quartile gain.<sup>3</sup>

These opportunities for students to receive feedback and use it to adjust their own work or actions help them develop the self-regulation skills (critical thinking, perseverance, problem solving, and self-assessment) they need for success in college and careers.

### Impact of Quality Feedback on Performance



### GOAL #3: Boost student achievement and ownership of learning.

### SOLUTION: Encourage student collaboration.

In a meta-analysis on peer relationships and achievement, Johnson, Johnson, and Roseth<sup>4</sup> found that when students work collaboratively, they tend to learn more, transfer their learning, and think positively about the learning environment.

As more and more employers list collaboration as one of the top the skills they seek in new hires, it's apparent that this transfer of learning matters when preparing students for college and career. According to another meta-analysis by John Hattie, cooperative learning has a 0.4 effect size or almost half of a standard deviation.<sup>5</sup> Effect size tells us how effective something was, with half a standard deviation equating to about 1.5 grade levels.

If you want to raise student achievement, increase the use of cooperative learning. Allowing students to collaborate on and in the learning makes a difference.

Embedding classroom formative assessment practices within instruction—the minute-to-minute and day-by-day activities—allows both students and teachers to make strategic real-time adjustments to what they are doing. In the next article in this series, we'll explore four key formative assessment practices that can make a difference in the classroom, as well as practical tools you can use to either get started with or refine your formative assessment practice.



If you want to raise student achievement,  
increase the use of cooperative learning.



# Enrich your ability to boost every student's engagement and ownership of learning

NWEA offers a range of professional learning options to help districts engage all students and drive growth through classroom formative assessment practice. Call 866-654-3246 or contact your account manager to learn more about how we can support your vision.

1. Peterson, Penelope L., Thomas Carpenter, and Elizabeth Fennema. "Teachers' Knowledge of Students' Knowledge in Mathematics Problem Solving: Correlational and Case Analyses." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 81, no. 4 (1989): 558-69.
2. Mcmillan, James H. "Why We Need Research on Classroom Assessment." *SAGE Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment*: 2-16.
3. Marzano, Robert J., Debra Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.
4. David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Cary Roseth. "Do Peer Relationships Affect Achievement?" *The Newsletter of the Cooperative Learning Institute* Volume 21:1 (March 2006).
5. Hattie, John A. C. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Routledge, 2009.