



Boosting Engagement and Growth with Formative Assessment: Leaders Share Their Lessons

Spotlight on: formative assessment success stories

- Learn from educational leaders who've made formative assessment practice a team priority
- Glean tips from their regional agency, district, and school experience

In *How to Make Formative Assessment a Habit: Beyond the Classroom Practices*, we discussed specific ways in which leaders can support the ongoing process of teachers collaborating, building, and sustaining their work with formative assessment instructional practice. Now, we'll move from theory to practice and give you an inside look at how three very different organizations are doing exactly this and making a measurable difference in the lives of students and teachers. We'll be sharing insights from the perspective of a regional agency, a district, and a school.

Regional agency finds instructional strategies that meet the needs of a large, diverse service area

REGIONAL SERVICE AGENCY SNAPSHOT

Southern Oregon Education Service District (ESD)

Location: Southern Oregon

Student population: more than 49,000 students in 13 member districts that cover 10,000 square miles

Economic markers: varies by district

"I've been teaching for 31 years. [Participation in NWEA formative assessment professional development] is one of the most powerful things I've done. It has literally affected me day-to-day in how I work with kids."

Eric Sandrock, Middle School Math Teacher,
Ashland Middle School, Southern Oregon ESD, Oregon

Like many regional service agencies, Southern Oregon ESD serves a large, geographically dispersed population. Its members include educators from a wide cross-section of subject areas, and with varied experience. In 2012, when the agency was looking to invest a small allocation of professional development funds, Superintendent Scott Perry wanted to focus that budget on educators' most pressing needs. When he consulted the ESD's group of curriculum directors, he says, "looking at the Common Core and our governor's education initiatives, the group identified a strong need to support teachers in using formative assessment data in a systematic and ongoing way to guide instruction."



In his middle school math class, Eric Sandroch uses formative assessment techniques daily to quickly gauge student understanding. Here, he asks his students to let him know if they're ready to move on. Eric explains: "A hand straight up means 'I totally get this,' a hand parallel to the ground means 'I need a bit of help,' and a hooked hand means 'I have no idea what I'm doing.' He has the kids close their eyes when rating themselves, so there's no pressure to respond in the same way as anyone else.

The impact has been huge and teachers are continuing to use formative assessment techniques long after those initial workshops. But how exactly do you successfully roll out a PD effort across a region that spans 10,000 square miles and thirteen districts? Here are some ideas from Southern Oregon ESD:

- **Let districts (and their teacher leaders) volunteer to participate.** The ESD gave all member districts an opportunity to take part in an initial round of professional development for teacher leaders at a central location. Each interested district selected a handful of teachers across buildings and subject areas to participate in three intense days of professional learning. The goal was to start small with the most motivated participants, see the impact, and ramp up.
- **Give teacher leaders a collaboration structure.** An initial three days of learning for teacher leaders were focused on two things: learning formative assessment practices they could take back to their colleagues and use immediately, as well as getting comfortable with a recommended process and timeline for collaborating with colleagues on a monthly basis.

Participants agreed: the latter commitment was essential to embed the learning into daily practice. While the onus of a monthly meeting in a teacher learning community can seem daunting, AP Psychology and American Studies teacher Jay Preskenis shares that his colleagues quickly found their collaboration to be “more worthwhile than anything else they’re doing.” He says, “out of 20 people, 17 of them say, ‘This is the best two hours of my month,’ or ‘This is the most important committee I’m part of, because it applies to what I’m doing tomorrow in class.’”

- **Ask teachers what can help make formative assessment sustainable for them.** English and Social Studies teacher Nikki Thommen says “A huge component of the success of this initiative is our leadership’s willingness to support teachers. Teachers are excited to make this commitment, but we wouldn’t be able to do [it] without support and resources from our principal, our district, or the ESD.” That support can include anything from providing release time and flexible scheduling options to honoring a commitment to keep monthly meeting attendance to just teachers (no leadership) to foster an atmosphere of open and honest feedback among peers.
- **Build momentum with round two.** Seeing initial success and excitement from teachers, many members of the ESD chose to send additional teacher leaders to a second installment of professional development less than a year after the first. At Ashland Middle School, teacher leaders who participated in the initial workshops mentioned that many colleagues became interested after they saw them collaborating and using new techniques in class.

[Read the full case study to learn more](#)

District boosts teacher and student engagement

DISTRICT SNAPSHOT

West Ada School District

Location: Meridian, Idaho

Student population: 37,517 pre-K – 12 students in 54 sites

Economic markers: 25% economically disadvantaged

“When you have the consistency of common vocabulary and formative techniques in each building and across buildings, students become accustomed to it and get better at being able to show and own their learning. The kids feel empowered, the teachers feel empowered, and teachers and students truly become partners.”

Teri Powell, District Assessment Coordinator



In this classroom, the teacher is using a formative assessment technique (ABCD cards) to ask all kids to simultaneously show whether they understand the material. Everyone raises their answer at the same time, which allows the teacher to immediately gauge the level of understanding and adjust the lesson.

West Ada's District Assessment Coordinator Teri Powell explains, "We started thinking about formative assessment because we wanted all teachers to have a toolkit to collect evidence of student learning on a regular basis. We wanted them to be able to answer these two questions: 'How do I know my students are learning? And how do I then adjust my instruction to make the best use of the limited time?'"

The district was intent on setting up an ongoing professional development experience to help all teachers hone their formative assessment know-how for the long haul. To help understand the impact formative assessment had on teacher practices and student achievement, West Ada worked with the NWEA Research Department on a two-year study. The study followed teachers and students who participated in formative assessment practice alongside counterparts in control schools. After one year, teachers who participated in this PD initiative a) continuously elicited evidence of student learning more than non-participating teachers, b) provided more structured opportunities for students to take ownership of their own learning, and c) showed a difference in adapting their instruction to meet students' learning needs. In year two, teachers continued to show improvement.

District-wide, students whose teachers participated in PD focused on formative assessment practices reported that they knew what they were supposed to learn and how to learn it. Those students also reported high levels of engagement. The more a teacher identified and shared learning expectations with students, as well as structured opportunities to engage students as instructional resources for one another, the more students reported experiencing increased engagement in their own learning.

In order to truly embed the use of formative practices district-wide, the West Ada team—much like the teams from the Southern Oregon ESD—recommended starting with a group of volunteer schools, then expanding. Additionally, Teri Powell and David Harrison (one of West Ada’s teacher leaders), shared three more tips:

- **Invest in leadership buy-in.** According to West Ada’s two-year study, teachers implemented more recommended practices when they saw their commitment to formative assessment mirrored by school and district leaders and felt supported by their administration. To help leaders best support their staff, Powell recommends investing time in getting leader buy-in upfront and involving them in initial professional learning alongside teachers.
- **Make a long-term PD plan.** “We’ve all had one-day PD,” Teri says, “The problem is, it doesn’t get embedded into your practice. One of the things we liked about working with NWEA on our formative assessment PD was that we had a chance to start with several days of foundational learning with a coach and then implement a two-year program that we sustained with our own monthly teacher learning community meetings at the building level.”
- **Help teacher leaders connect.** Participating teachers cited sharing experiences with their peers in teacher learning communities as the most helpful aspect of the ongoing initiative. Teri shared several ways in which school and district leaders can support the teacher leaders who head up and sustain these critically important local communities. Some ideas to consider include asking experienced teacher leaders to mentor newer ones, as well as setting up a meeting for teacher leaders mid-year to share experiences and ideas across buildings.

[*Read the full research study to learn more*](#)

School uplifts its culture and achieves double-digit growth

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

Our Lady of Hungary Catholic School

Location: South Bend, Indiana

Student population: Serves ~ 200 pre-K – 8 students; 80% of K – 8 students are Latino, with 40% receiving English Language Learner (ELL) services

Economic markers: 100% free or reduced lunch

“You can have all the data in the world. But if you don’t know how to navigate it and what to do with it, then who cares? Being given the tool of formative assessment and different ways to use it was my lifesaver.”

Kari Wuszke, Teacher,
Our Lady of Hungary Catholic School, South Bend, Indiana

When the school decided to focus on formative assessment practice, Our Lady of Hungary was experiencing a seismic shift in its student demographics and cycling through its third principal in four years. The staff needed both a morale boost and some instructional alignment to help maximize their diverse students’ achievement.

Principal Kevin Goralczyk notes that OLH faced educators’ universal challenge: “You know what you need the kids to know, but how do you know that they learned it? We didn’t want to teach our kids for the minute to pass the test, we wanted to make sure that we had our kids learning from year-to-year and that their learning transferred across years.”

To “right the ship,” as the team called it, OLH leaders took two significant steps. To track student growth, they began using an interim assessment—Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®), also from NWEA—three times per year. At the same time, they immersed teachers in professional development focused on formative assessment practice to allow them to track and guide growth in between interim checkpoints. In the first year of implementation, winter interim assessment results were sobering. The staff reconvened and made specific plans to do better in the second half of the school year. Spring interim results proved that the use of classroom formative assessment practices was paying off.

In Year 2, all classes significantly improved their mean scores in mathematics, literacy, and reading. Winter 2016 MAP testing showed five out of nine classrooms, receiving scores above the norms in reading and language usage (whereas all had started the previous year below the norm). Nearly every class has shown growth on both MAP and state tests. Recently, 90% of third graders (including all ELL students) passed the IREAD state-wide assessment, a 34% improvement from the previous year.

What can we learn from their experience? Here’s what Principal Goralczyk and OLH teacher leaders recommend:

- **Distribute leadership.** “I think the biggest mistake most administrators make is thinking they have to lead in everything. You have to trust your staff,” principal Goralczyk emphasizes. “You have to lay the framework for what the change would be, then you identify your leaders in the building—your master teachers. They help you empower everyone else.” Goralczyk chose the leaders and trusted them to head up monthly meetings. Each teacher leader guided a group of 8–10 peers; together, they learned new formative assessment practices, shared successes and failures judgment-free, and made a plan for trying something new the following month.

- **Don't just share content, build culture.** Teacher leader Kari Wuszke says leadership's support of teachers and its provision of the time and resources to have the whole staff focus on formative assessment practice across all grades and subjects spurred a major positive shift in school culture and increased trust both among peers and between teachers and leadership. "We feel entrusted as well as emboldened to do what we do."
- **Make it manageable.** Middle school English teacher Melissa Wroblewski notes that formative practices complemented what she and other teachers were already doing rather than creating a drain on her schedule. The teacher leaders helped build buy-in among peers by taking it one small step at a time and building in elements of choice. Each month, the collaborative peer groups would learn a new practice and choose how to apply it in their own classroom (which might look different depending on the grade or subject they teach). Wroblewski says the impact was immediate, and well worth the time investment: "It's not like you're spending oodles of time outside the classroom. And you get so much good feedback from the students that you can use in the moment to change up lesson plans on the fly. It helps you create the vision for the next couple of days, the week, or even the rest of the quarter."



This is an example of the use of ABCD cards at Our Lady of Hungary.

[Read the full case study to learn more](#)

As word spreads about the measurable impact of formative assessment on student engagement and growth (as well as teacher engagement and school culture), more and more school, district, and regional agency leaders are considering how they can take practical steps toward making these instructional practices sustainable for all staff. Here's to celebrating the teachers who are already using these practices and to working together to empower all teachers to drive student ownership of learning.

TRY IT NOW:

School, District, and Regional Agency Leaders: If you're thinking about how to support all teachers in embedding formative assessment practices more regularly into their instruction, consider which top three tips you find most relevant from the examples shared by other leaders in this article. Would it help to schedule some professional learning for the whole teaching staff, or a pilot group, to focus on practical and specific ways to use formative assessment practices to engage all students?

Teacher Leaders and Instructional Coaches: Share this article with school and district leaders and consider how you can collaborate to carve out some time for teachers to work together on these practices.

Teachers: If you're eager to use formative assessment more regularly but need additional support from leadership to help carve out time to share and learn with colleagues, pass this article along to instructional coaches and/or school and district leaders. Other leaders' experiences might help them find new ways to make this successful in your area.

Everyone: When it comes to embedding formative assessment into instruction, what's one thing you'd like to do that might require support from school or district leaders? What's one thing you're already doing where leadership has helped you be successful? Tweet your ideas to **#NWEAformative**.

Enrich your ability to boost every student's engagement and ownership of learning: visit NWEA.org/formativeassessment to learn how we'll support your vision of student achievement and growth by helping you build and sustain classroom formative assessment practice at the school and district level.