

Setting the Stage for Formative Assessment Part 1: The State's Role

Transcript of Webinar

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Hello, and welcome to the first of a four-part webinar series about how to implement formative assessment, presented by CSAI, the Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation. The first webinar in this series is called “Setting the Stage for Formative Assessment: Part 1, The State’s Role” which was presented live on September 20, 2017. This is a re-recording of that live webinar. A copy of this slide deck, handouts, and a complete transcript are available on the CSAI website; the link will be provided at the end of this presentation.

The purpose of this webinar is to provide information and suggestions for state level stakeholders on how they can best support teachers in implementing formative assessment in the classroom. We focus on four topics: how formative assessment fits into a larger comprehensive assessment system, a shared definition of formative assessment, how formative assessment at the classroom level can be viewed by state level supporters, and how formative assessment fits into the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA. We hope these topics will aid state level staff in becoming informed and making decisions that set the stage for formative assessment to help students succeed in their states.

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Before we begin, we want to express our thanks to our partners at the Central and South Central Comprehensive Centers and our Formative Assessment Bi-Regional Advisory Board for their help with the planning of this webinar and for their states’ active participation in this series.

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This webinar is the first of a series of four webinars about how to establish an environment that supports formative assessment in the classroom, in other words, setting the stage for formative assessment. We have organized the series into four levels, or roles, that all work together to establish how students experience formative assessment in the classroom. First, we present the state’s role. What are the important considerations and understandings that educators at the state level have to be informed about in order to make good decisions to support formative assessment? Next we will consider these same questions at the district level, then at the school or building level, and finally at the classroom or teacher level. Today, you are here, at the state level. The other three roles will be examined in future webinars.

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Formative assessment requires learning goals. Today, we have four learning goals.

- First, understand how formative assessment fits into a comprehensive assessment system. This includes formative, interim, and summative assessments. How do they work together to provide a complete picture of each student's progress over the course of a school year?
- Second, define formative assessment as an instructional practice. While the word "assessment" often connotes testing, the true heart of formative assessment is as an instructional practice that takes place on a daily basis among students and teachers in everyday lessons and learning experiences. Coming to consensus on a definition of formative assessment as a process is one of the most important things you can do at the state level.

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- Third, illustrate the formative assessment process as it is implemented during the school year. Formative assessment is a useful bridge between state and district policies and the day to day instruction in a classroom. While different stakeholders have very different experiences and roles with formative assessment, it is crucial for state level educators to understand how formative assessment might look in a school over the course of a year and the ways in which they can most effectively support implementation.
- And finally, explain how formative assessment is represented in ESSA. When explaining or justifying the importance of formative assessment in the schools, it can be extremely useful to be able to understand it in relation to legislative mandates. We will go over the parts of ESSA that most directly address formative assessment.

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Our first goal is to understand how formative assessment fits into a comprehensive assessment system. Assessment has two main purposes.

1. It measures student progress and success in achieving state standards.
2. It communicates what is important for students to know, which motivates educators to focus on teaching accordingly.

One of the first understandings is that assessment is not a one size fits all endeavor; instead, we need different kinds of assessments to meet the decision-making needs of different audiences.

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What we – as educators and stakeholders – want to accomplish is to have students attain deep learning of year-long standards. To get to assessment that benefits learning, educators at every level need to understand the uses and purposes of assessment. That's where the comprehensive assessment system framework comes in.

- It helps educators and stakeholders understand what a balanced assessment is.
- It lays out how different types of assessment are supposed to work.
- It shows how the coordination of assessments ensures strategic action across all levels to support students' achievement of college and career ready standards, or CCRS.

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Schools use a variety of assessments: formative, summative, curriculum-embedded, performance, interim and benchmark assessments, district and state tests – to name a few. As you can see here, we can consider how assessment supports students' successful journey along this progression of assessments, either top down or bottom up.

- If bottom up, we start with the core of immediate classroom assessment and see how it builds to end-of-year success.
- Or we can backward chain from large scale assessments to daily learning goals, which is what we're going to do today.

So starting with end-of-year summative assessments, they general thumbs up or thumbs down information on student proficiency relative to grade-level standards. The results from these assessments are often aggregated, or clustered together, to show how subgroups are performing relative to other groups. If used in isolation, these assessments provide information to school and district leaders, policymakers, and the public – basically, those outside the classroom door.

- Even though relatively general, data from these end-of-year tests can provide feedback on strong and weak points in school curriculum; compare relative effectiveness of programs or interventions; and provide a general sense of how students and schools are doing.

Understanding the depth and breadth of individual students' proficiency, however, requires additional, more detailed information.

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Interim or benchmark assessments are assessments mandated by school or district authorities outside the classroom. They are administered periodically—often quarterly—over a school year. Primary users of these assessments are typically school-level or district-level personnel, while teachers, students, and parents could find results from interim and benchmark test useful.

Purposes of interim or benchmark assessments include:

- support for school and district data-based decision-making, especially in providing special help to those students identified as struggling,
- helping predict whether students are likely to test proficient on the end-of-year state tests, and
- evaluation of programs or interventions.

Interim results can be aggregated to provide schools and districts with information on the relative performance of classrooms within schools, schools within districts, and in some cases, districts to districts.

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Classroom summative assessments are often given at the end of a unit and used for grading purposes. They can come in multiple formats—multiple choice, true-false, short constructed response or essay items—or they can also be culminating projects, assignments, or performances.

Prime users at this stage are students and teachers, but principals and grade-level teachers may come together around common assignments or assessments to analyze results, chart progress, and take action. Although

students and teachers can use the results from these tests to provide feedback and identify gaps that need to be filled in, these actions may be a little late for students and teachers to go back to learn and teach the content again.

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The last two circles on formative assessment are separated into two types, *in process formative assessment* and *formal checks*.

Formal checks comprise of quizzes, students' completed in-class or homework assignments, exit tickets, presentations and the like, and are used to check student understanding of the content. These checks are often given daily and can help teachers and students to look back at what students have learned and to look forward in subsequent instruction, building on students' strengths and filling in any gaps in knowledge and skill students may have. While the focus here is still formative, student performance on these assessments may sometimes start to figure into student grades, a decidedly summative purpose.

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In process formative assessment is distinguished from all other types of assessments in this system by its focus on continuous assessment and immediate action to support teaching and learning. Here, teachers engage students in a sequence of instructional activities that are designed to help students to achieve learning goals. Students' responses during these activities become opportunities to collect ongoing, *in process evidence* of student learning. Primary users for formative assessment are students and teachers.

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In order to see how participants might apply the webinar's first learning goal to their specific contexts, we asked them: What do you think is the next step for strengthening the role of formative assessment in your current assessment system?

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Participants said that their next steps for strengthening the role of formative assessment within their states' comprehensive assessment system were...

- developing common language and a definition of formative assessment in the state agency and across the state
- providing professional development
- sharing success stories that highlight the power of formative assessment; and
- ensuring that people understand the intents of and resources to support the comprehensive assessment system

Now that you've begun to think about how formative assessment fits into your state's comprehensive assessment system, let's define further what formative assessment really means and try to come to a common definition that can serve as the starting point for your state's discussion about how formative assessment will be implemented for your teachers and students.

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Going back to our earlier graphic that lays out the entire comprehensive assessment system, let's try to define exactly what we mean by the first circle, classroom formative assessment.

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Our framework for formative assessment is as a process that encapsulates four major parts.

- First, establish high quality Learning Goals, drawing from standards, learning progressions, and disciplinary practices. These should be pretty familiar to all of you; they're often referred to as learning objectives. Keep in mind that standards by themselves are not often very good Learning Goals. Although Learning Goals are a familiar concept, writing high quality learning goals that align with the rest of the formative assessment process is one of the greatest challenges of implementation.
- Second, articulate Success Criteria, to communicate clearly to students how they can achieve the Learning Goals. These are observable behaviors of things students will be able to do that both teachers and students use in order visualize and organize progress toward the learning goals.
- Third, plan to gather and analyze information about student progress toward Learning Goals. Every success criterion should have at least one opportunity for students to provide evidence of how they are doing in relation to that criterion. Teachers analyze that evidence, both in the moment, and immediately after the lesson.
- And fourth, plan to take Pedagogical Action in response to evidence of student progress. Both in the moment, and immediately following the lesson, teachers respond to the evidence of student learning and progress.

And, of course, once Learning Goals are met, move on to new Learning Goals. Throughout the process, engage students as partners by using student-friendly language and integrating peer and self-assessment as a key component.

Now that you've seen a graphical representation of the formative assessment process, let's look at the most common definition of formative assessment, developed by the FAST SCASS, which many of you are already familiar with.

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This is the text of the FAST SCASS definition:

Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning, to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes.

Now let's see how this definition maps onto the graphical representation that we showed you before.

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Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning, to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes.

This four part framework is how we try to organize all of our training materials so that this incredibly complex process can be presented in comprehensible units. We also believe that some parts of this process are more

relevant to state level educators than others. For example, a very effective use of state resources that can conceivably reach every teacher in the state immediately is to focus on how teachers can interpret and use standards to develop high quality learning goals. It would be much harder at the state level to observe and give feedback on each teachers' pedagogical actions since those are so dependent on individual classroom contexts – those are the types of concerns that we'll address in the classroom level webinar.

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In order to collect evidence of participants' application of the second learning goal of the webinar, we asked them to answer the question: How would you persuade teachers to adopt formative assessment as an instructional practice?

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Participants said that in order to persuade teachers to adopt formative assessment as an instructional practice they would...

- show great examples in both videos and in person
- show them data that supports this
- provide resources to help teachers see that it results in strategic interventions
- make it accessible to novice teachers
- collaborate within building with more expert teachers
- model formative assessment in adult learning and out-of-school contexts
- create different entry points for teachers at all levels of formative assessment knowledge and experience

Now that you've thought about formative assessment as an instructional practice that is based in the classrooms and schools, let's examine what this might look like during a school year.

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Up to this point we've thought about the elements of formative assessment in theoretical terms. In this next section, we are going to talk about how these elements can all work together organically in a school setting. We will think about how formative assessment might look from the beginning to the end of a school year. In other words, the Life Cycle of formative assessment in a school setting.

Since this webinar is intended for those who support teachers at the state level, we'll use a state level lens to examine what you might expect to see given your role and status. Regardless of how close or how far away you are from the classroom, it's crucial that everyone interested in formative assessment visualize concrete representations and illustrations of how these theoretical concepts look when they're implemented in schools.

Particularly, we'll talk about what you might observe or want to observe in classrooms so that you know formative assessment is happening. Most importantly we'll talk about the existing methods and resources that you are already familiar with or use that you can map onto the FA process and achieve the coherence of a clearly aligned and articulated statewide system of assessment that begins and ends with quality instruction in the classroom and successful outcomes for students. In this webinar, we focus on the first half of the process, which includes learning goals and success criteria.

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Let's revisit this earlier picture of how we seek to move our student through a year-long learning progression toward achievement of the standards. That line sure looks nice and neat, doesn't it? We all know that's not what it looks like in a real school. So in this next section, we want to illustrate what the formative assessment process might really look like at the school level, how it is experienced by teachers and students. We're going to focus today on the parts of formative assessment that make the most sense for state level people to know most deeply, namely the standards, the learning progressions that lead to achievement of the standards, lesson or unit learning objectives, success criteria, and assessments. The "in the moment" classroom practices we will focus on in our future webinars about how to set the stage for formative assessment at the district, building, and classroom levels.

We'll also ask you to think about and share how these big picture formative assessment elements actually look like in your contexts, even if they're not yet officially considered "formative assessment". It's likely that you're doing a lot more formative assessment than you think, but maybe it's just called something else.

First things first. Let's start this story just as summer is ending, and teachers are coming back on campus...

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Our teacher has so many questions.

- What standards will she focus on?
- What will her new students be like?
- What new initiatives are being rolled out this year?
- Who are her new colleagues?
- Most importantly, with so much to do, how will she accomplish it all?

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Ahhhh, paid summer planning sessions to the rescue. Thankfully for our teacher, her state and district have ponied up for some paid time to really look at the standards with her colleagues so that they can lay out a yearlong plan and agree on the key targets that they're going to hit this year. Perhaps her state's content area teams have pulled together a really user friendly, comprehensive scope and sequence for her subjects and grade level. This is the backbone and starting point of our teacher's implementation of formative assessment. It is also, perhaps, where state agencies can provide the most valuable and cohesive support for classroom teachers.

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Remember that straight line we saw earlier between where the student is and that student's journey to achieving the standards? Part of making that journey as smooth as possible depends on everyone working together to ensure that those high quality standards are accessible not only to the student but to the teacher. Standards are dense, complex pieces of academic language that often do not transfer well to the classroom without some kind of transformation or decomposition. We call the intermediate or medium size elements learning progressions. They can be sequential, breaking a complex task down to its simplest parts and building those up incrementally, one step at a time. Once the larger concepts in the standards have been articulated, it's a lot easier to pluck out a lesson or unit-sized learning objective that can be shared with students. Just as we did at the beginning of this webinar, when we distilled the complex topic of formative assessment into four

bite-sized and related learning goals, so too should teachers and those who support teachers do the same for students.

Learning goals reflect standards, disciplinary practices, academic language, and classroom contexts. Learning goals are best left up to individual teachers, but they need plenty of guidance in the form of high quality learning progressions based on standards, as well as high quality exemplars. These can all be provided by state agencies.

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The real power of ensuring that high quality learning goals success criteria are made accessible and shared with students is that they become a common language for everyone at the school, and notably in the context of district and state level employees, everyone outside of the school as well. These become actionable, comprehensible academic targets that can be used in a number of ways in both instruction and assessment. They provide a common structure and framework for differentiating instruction and to include any number of standards type and other considerations, such as social emotional learning, and so forth. This is where all the many inputs that go into a high quality lesson plan become clarified, edited, and made possible for students to achieve.

Again, while the day to day specific learning goals and success criteria are determined at the classroom level, teachers need support by being able to see plenty of high quality exemplars, in writing, in videos, and in person. Being provided with release time for teachers to really look at all of these is probably the number one request by classroom teachers who want to implement formative assessment.

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Success Criteria, which are often found in can-do statements or complete the sentence starter “students will be able to”, are observable, and for that reason are incredibly valuable to those who support teachers but are not in the classroom every day. These become the shared targets and language that teachers and those who support teachers can use in order to talk about classroom instruction in really efficient and substantive ways.

And not only do they allow adults to talk to each other, but of course they allow students to participate actively in the conversation. Success Criteria are a contract with the students; the adults are saying that if they accomplish these things, they will have achieved the intended learning and can move forward. For this reason, they need to be clear, accessible, and worthwhile. They should reflect learning that is meaningful and achievable. Looking at 180 days of success criteria should tell you the story of what it means to achieve a year’s worth of learning in a classroom. For classroom observers, they are invaluable for helping you determine at a glance whether or not learning objectives are being met through activities that are intentionally designed for that purpose.

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Once that cycle of instruction has been completed and the teacher has determined that students are ready to move on, the teacher goes back to learning progressions, hopefully you can now bump the first learning goal off and move on to the next.

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And before you know it, we've reached year end summative assessments. The cycle is nearing completion.

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Hopefully after 180 days of well-articulated success criteria based on high quality learning objectives, continually supported by ongoing collection and analysis of evidence, we've all worked together to meet the goal.

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Which would, of course, be... Getting to summer...

And whether you're ready or not, the cycle of formative assessment begins again...

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It's back to school.

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Now that you've envisioned how the first part of the process might unfold in a school, let's bring it back to how these school-level practices can be supported by programs or initiatives that claim to help you inject, infuse, implement formative assessment in to your school system. As state level supporters of teachers, you may be in a position to advice on or make decisions about such products and services. This could be anything from a textbook series to a new online portal, or a consultant who wants to provide a one-shot PD for your teachers. Or maybe it's an entire statewide comprehensive literacy plan. Maybe it's something that doesn't cost anything at all, like a collection of formative assessments that you can try out in your classrooms.

I think everyone in this audience knows that an exit ticket by itself isn't an example of formative assessment, but plenty of resources out there focus on the procedural activity or strategy that elicits the evidence of learning, rather than ensuring that what is to be learned makes sense, is clearly articulated, and has been supported all along prior to the actual collection and interpretation of evidence.

Questions for Evaluating Formative Assessment

Alignment: Does the assessment directly align with your learning goals for a lesson?

Grain size: Does the assessment address a limited number (i.e., 1-3) learning goals?

Feedback: Does the assessment provide evidence of student learning in relation to the learning goals? Can you use that evidence to take pedagogical action?

Timing: Is the assessment embedded within an instructional activity? Can you use the evidence from the assessment to take pedagogical action within the same lesson, day, or week?

Student Involvement: Does the assessment provide students with specific feedback on their progress and next steps?

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In order to see how participants in the webinar were able to apply the third learning goal to their state contexts, we asked them to briefly describe their state's strongest achievement in accomplishing formative assessment.

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Participants said that their state's strongest achievement in accomplishing formative assessment were:

- free and open curricular resources that promote formative assessment created by state agency
- inclusion in state strategic plan
- inclusion of formative assessment in state's model of the instructional cycle and assessment literacy
- participation in national initiatives that highlight formative assessment

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We have so far looked at formative assessment's role in a comprehensive assessment system, drilled down into definitions of formative assessment, and provided an extended example of formative assessment in action.

So how do we bring the vision – and challenge – of having students achieve challenging standards using formative assessment? Here we'll turn to ESSA as a launching point for how you, at the state department of education, can leverage the law's current mandates to support the work of teachers and students in the classroom.

We found three strong connections for formative assessment work in ESSA.

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Formative assessment is a key component of a balanced assessment system. In Titles 1 and 2 of ESSA, formative assessment is mentioned as part of a balanced assessment system, along with summative and interim assessment. However, ESSA doesn't define what these terms are, more or less provide guidance in how to operationalize and implement a balanced system with formative assessment in your state.

But as you heard earlier in this webinar, we presented the comprehensive assessment system as a framework for a balanced assessment system. We focused on how formative assessment is central to a comprehensive assessment system and laid out specific uses and purposes of each type of assessment in a balanced system. Formative assessment is a way to closely monitor students' daily progress toward achievement of standards and accountability assessments, e.g., year-end summative assessments. Formative assessment is a window, daily progress – unlike interim/year-end summative assessment, where the results arrive too late to effectively address student learning needs.

As state education leaders, we think that this knowledge about assessment is critical in helping you shape policy and the work in and around your state.

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Formative assessment is an evidence-based instructional practice.

Research supports effectiveness of formative assessment as a means of achieving student academic success because it's rooted in purposeful and clear instruction AND gives students an active role in their learning. Most of us are familiar with Black and Wiliam's 1998 meta-review of studies which concluded that formative assessment had an effect size – or a statistical measure used to examine a strength of a phenomenon – to be medium to large (between .4 to .7) on standardized tests, making it one of the most effective educational interventions in practice, particularly for low achieving students.

Black and Wiliam's landmark study has been supported by additional research, namely by a meta-analysis conducted by John Hattie in 2009, in which he analyzed over 800 studies on effective teaching and found that the elements that we described earlier in the formative assessment process – such as feedback based on lesson goals - are the ones that increased student achievement the most.

As the ESSA statues mention the use of evidence-based instructional practice, we want to emphasize how these studies are some examples of an evidence-base for formative assessment. More studies are listed on a handout found on our website.

As state education leaders, you can help students, teachers, and schools that are identified as needing comprehensive support and improvement in implementing formative assessment as an evidence-based activity to improve teaching and student outcomes.

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The formative assessment process, as an evidence-based component of a balanced assessment system, is also part of a multi-tier system of support.

Per ESSA's definition of multi-tier system of support, we have shown how formative assessment is part of a "comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices."

Formative assessment allows for close observation and immediate feedback on student learning in order "to support a rapid response to students' needs," as stated in ESSA.

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Due to time, we were unable to ask participants to answer this fourth question that maps on to the fourth learning goal of the webinar. We would have asked them to apply knowledge of ESSA to their own contexts in explaining why formative assessment is important to student success.

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So, to review...

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1. Understand how formative assessment fits into a comprehensive assessment system.
2. Define formative assessment as an instructional practice.
3. Illustrate the formative assessment process as it is implemented during the school year.
4. Explain how formative assessment is represented in ESSA.

- What do you think is the next step for strengthening the role of formative assessment in your current assessment system?
- How would you persuade teachers to adopt formative assessment as an instructional practice?
- Briefly describe your state's strongest achievement in implementing formative assessment.
- Think about one of your stakeholder groups. Taking one or more elements from ESSA, explain to that person why formative assessment is integral to student success.

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This is the first of a four-part series, in which we discuss a comprehensive assessment system, definition of formative assessment via illustrations, and discuss how formative assessment fits into ESSA.

- For the next webinar, we plan to discuss how formative assessment can be supportive at the district level. Some ideas are how to provide disciplinary support, to help with curriculum planning, and to address the needs of diverse learners.
- At the school level, we plan to address issues such as data analysis and lesson planning.
- And at the classroom level, [we plan to address] issues such as teacher practice and student engagement.

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Thank you so much for joining us today for this webinar. We hope you will join us for the rest of this series. The website where you can get the handouts referenced in this presentation as well as our contact information are on this slide; please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions about this content of this presentation or would like further assistance.



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