

## Defining Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is a process, through which teachers and students integrate in-the-moment evidence of learning into daily classroom teaching and learning. This definition is well-documented in research and international policy documents, and there are numerous published definitions. WestEd has adopted Bell and Cowie’s (2001) definition of formative assessment which states “**the process used by teachers and students to notice, recognize, and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning.**”

Let’s unpack the Cowie and Bell definition, phrase by phrase:

### The process...

For most people, the word *assessment* conjures the image of a *test*. Formative assessment, in contrast, is a process that involves the use of multiple practices through which teachers and students elicit and use evidence to advance learning. The formative assessment rubrics developed by the Council for Chief State School Officers (i.e., the FARROP Rubrics) were developed to articulate the core practices that take place during the process of formative assessment. WestEd conceptualizes the formative assessment process using the Feedback Loop graphic, shown below, which outlines a **three-stage process** that includes five core practices teachers and students use during formative assessment implementation.

Image 1: The Formative Assessment Feedback Loop



### *...used by teachers and students...*

The result of formative assessment is that students and teachers, working together, develop new ways for students to self-regulate and monitor their learning. This practice is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to develop in a traditional classroom environment, in which the teacher's role is to instruct students, and the student's role is to receive information. In such classrooms, where knowledge authority is in the hands of teachers, teachers "decide" what students will know and how it will be measured. This vertical relationship privileges teacher expertise and places students in a compliant stance, dependent on the teacher for their learning to be "right or wrong." For formative assessment to reach the goal of student self-regulation, this traditional hierarchy must be undone. Students and teachers work together to review and make meaning of current evidence, operating in a horizontal relationship. In formative assessment, learning is explored, and feedback is provided by peers, by the teacher, and by the student him or herself. Formative assessment practices, as outlined in the Feedback Loop, guide the process through which this partnership takes shape.

### *...to notice, recognize, and respond to student learning...*

One of the most important shifts in formative assessment is to notice learning as it is emerging. Not to notice if students are on task, or if they are timely in their submissions, or if their behavior is acceptable, but to notice learning. In formative assessment, teacher observation is focused on noticing how students show evidence of emerging understanding. Teachers look for students' partial or not-yet-fully-formed ideas as the basis for being able to effectively respond to learning. But noticing also involves students. A key part of formative assessment is that students also learn to notice, recognize and respond to learning. Once learning is noticed, a teacher, a peer, or the student him or herself can respond, by offering guidance and support that helps students take next steps. Noticing and responding to evidence is rooted in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge - what they know about developing understanding in that domain. It is also rooted in students having a shared understanding of the daily goal. Formative assessment hinges on teachers and students being able to notice learning in order to quickly and effectively respond. Strategies for responding move away from traditional dichotomies of learning, such as right/wrong, expert/novice, or "mastery learning". Rather, teachers and students turn to exploring learning as it emerges, looking for ideas that are understood along the way, towards expertise. Responses move from "find it and fix it" strategies to a focus on deepening what is known, and providing hints, clues, prompts or questions that nudge learning along, and help students see progress as their ideas take shape and they move towards meeting the lesson Learning Goal.

### *...in order to enhance that learning...*

All elements of the formative assessment process are designed to enhance learning. Learning is enhanced by the use of daily Learning Goals and Success Criteria, which, when shared and or developed with students, helps them internalize what successful learning will look like. Learning is enhanced through the shared analysis of evidence, the use of in-the-moment feedback from peers and the teacher, and through student self-assessment. Learning is enhanced when students learn practices that

help them monitor and support their own learning and learn from peers. Ultimately, learning is enhanced as students gain confidence in their own identity as learners and manage their own learning.

*...during the learning.*

In many U.S. schools, assessment happens when the learning is done, and comes in the form of a score or a grade. When assessment information is shared after the learning it is not useful to students as they do not use it to guide learning. Assessments used in this way may do more harm than good. Some students may interpret poor grades as a personal failing (“I’m just stupid”). Other students report frustration that by not knowing what they did right or wrong, they are not able to apply the information as they continue their learning. Formative assessment shifts this dynamic by designing lessons that allow for evidence to be elicited and used when it is most effective, which is during the learning.