

Launching Formative Assessment Demonstration Sites and Lab Classrooms

What are lab classrooms and demonstration sites?

When visitors come to formative assessment lab classrooms and demonstration sites, they often say, “*I had no idea **this** was formative assessment.*” When visitors see students taking ownership over their learning and supporting their peers so all can advance together, they wonder how this came about. Is what they’re seeing a special case, an outlier classroom with a teacher privy to a special sauce no one else can access? The answer of course is no. At first blush, it can look like these classrooms and schools “just have good instruction,” yet when teachers and students explain what informs their practice, the complex system grounding their work shines through.

In lab classrooms, teachers and students are skilled at explaining what they are engaged in during lessons, the mindsets and beliefs that inform their work, and the steps they’ve taken to get there. Notice that these are not referred to as “model” classrooms. It is expected that in lab classrooms, teachers are sharing practices that they are still learning, alongside those that are more advanced. Lab classrooms and demonstration sites are some of the few structures that can show others what is “under the hood” in formative assessment classrooms and schools.

Lab classrooms are led by teachers who have already learned a range of formative assessment practices – i.e., Learning Goals, Success Criteria, eliciting evidence, feedback routines – and have integrated these into daily instruction. Teachers in these classrooms have also developed routines to support students to use evidence - through peer feedback, self-assessment and extending thinking during discourse - to monitor and advance their own learning. In formative assessment lab classrooms, visitors see evidence of new instructional routines and new roles for students as learners. Visitors may also see other evidence of formative assessment, such as a learning culture that supports students to take risks and share what they don’t yet know, or ways that students engage their peers in deeper learning.

A demonstration site takes a broader, systemic view. Beyond showcasing the lab classrooms within them, they also demonstrate how to lead formative assessment at an organizational level. They show how leaders can create adult learning cultures that mirror the ways students learn in formative assessment, that include a diverse range of learning options for educators. They provide visiting experiences that demonstrate how these learning cultures are necessary and required to support the work over time. In this way, these models of formative assessment practice support spread, depth, and sustainability.

How do these structures support formative assessment within demonstration sites?

Developing and implementing lab classrooms and demonstration sites strengthens formative assessment implementation within school sites and districts. They do this by creating rich opportunities for teachers and leaders to explore effective practice, articulate these practices using a common language, and come

to a collective understanding of what the important shifts are for students and teachers in formative assessment classrooms.

When developing these classrooms, teachers come together to determine the set of non-negotiable elements that they agree will exist in all of their lab classrooms. These elements serve to define how the district conceives of and operationalizes classroom formative assessment practices. They also translate into a series of “look fors” that visitors use to identify formative assessment practices during their observations. This process of collectively deciding upon these elements deepens teachers’ understanding of formative assessment, creates energy around the work, and deepens shifts in ownership. Ultimately, teachers create a shared mental model of this work and a common way to explain how formative assessment principles inform their everyday practice. Teachers’ engaged in this process deepen their understanding through the processes of:

- peer learning;
- consensus conversations;
- considering the perspectives of those unfamiliar with formative assessment; and
- explaining their thinking, practice, and experience to others.

Overall, these practices provide structures for learning collectively and deepening reflections about their role changes. They also help teachers to develop a more intentional formative assessment practice that they can articulate to others. Teachers need daily practice in doing the work with their students and then discussing this process with their peers. Much of this reflecting through peer discourse supports teachers to move towards conscious competence - a more expert stage in their learning where they understand and can describe what moves they and their students are making to promote student agency through formative assessment. This provokes a shift from unconscious competence, the stage when teachers know they are doing something right, but don’t know why what they are doing is working or how to explain it to others. Overtime, through reflection, feedback, and social engagement on these topics with support, teachers can begin to link specific classroom practices they and their students engage in to underlying learning principles. They are then able to describe this to others in a way that supports transfer and deep learning by their peers.

How do these structures support formative assessment beyond demonstration sites?

With peers, lab classroom teachers and demonstration site leaders anticipate what different types of visitors will need to hear about and how they can engage district, state and local leaders to dispel myths about formative assessment. The observations and conversations that occur during site visits contribute to an understanding of how formative assessment “fits” within the educational system and new models for district and school leaders.

When visitors who are new to formative assessment observe in these classrooms and school sites, they are able to see what’s possible for student learning, and the specific teacher skills that support these changes in the student role. Formative assessment is routinely misunderstood as a thing that teachers do, independent of a change in the student role. Yet research is clear that formative assessment has the greatest value when the student role shifts, such that students move away from a compliant approach to learning towards having increased engagement, ownership, and perseverance in their learning. Formative assessment demonstration sites and lab classrooms help those new to formative assessment:

- *Clarify what formative assessment is and is not*
- *See how principles of formative assessment are enacted*

- *Understand how formative assessment can look different in specific classroom contexts*
- *Envision new roles for students as owners of their learning*
- *Understand how it fits within a larger ecology of pedagogical practices*

Lab classroom teachers and demonstration site leaders also work to anticipate the information needs of educators coming to see their classrooms and schools who know a little more about formative assessment and who would benefit from seeing advanced student learning practices, explore classroom culture, and understand what teachers are doing to support agency, metacognition and self-regulation. They help those seeking to deepen their own practice or who wish to learn strategies to spread formative assessment:

- *Explore how formative assessment aligns with and supports other instructional approaches designed to shift the student role*
- *Recognize and honor teachers who have taken on learning formative assessment*
- *Energize discussions about, and opportunities for, spreading formative assessment within and across campuses*
- *Promote dialogue about equity and culture*

Overall, visitors to formative assessment lab classrooms express surprise and delight in observing shifts in the student and teacher roles that are the hallmark of formative assessment practice. On recent visits to lab classrooms, leaders have captured the following quotes from visiting district and school leaders, university professors, and teachers:

- “This is what equity looks like.”
- “We owe this to our students.”
- “You have restored my belief in the joy of learning.”
- “I can see the shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning.”
- “I love the teacher and student partnership. It is masterful dancing.”
- “Students are leading the learning.”
- “In this classroom, I cannot tell who is learning English, who has special needs, or who is homeless. That’s what we want for our students.”

What happens during a lab classroom or demonstration site visit?

Formative assessment lab classrooms call out specific formative assessment practices so that visitors gain an understanding of the full scope of practice. This happens best through structured learning opportunities – with learning activities that take place before, during and after the observation – that help visitors explore, observe and reflect on key elements of formative assessment. These structured protocols are developed by all stakeholders (teachers, principals and district leaders) and used consistently across all campuses. This structure should:

- orient visitors to formative assessment

- provide an opportunity, before the visit, to explore what visitors will see, with a focus on shifts in the teacher and student role
- establish ways to engage with and hear from students about their learning
- include resources to deepen observations, such as observational protocols or routines
- engage visitors in a structured debrief

How to get started leading formative assessment lab classrooms

Identify potential classrooms

Formative assessment lab classrooms should be showing more advanced use of formative assessment practices, such that there is evidence of shifts in the teacher and student role, and in the learning culture. Preliminary selection might take place with guidance from site leaders who have seen instructional shifts in targeted classrooms over time, or, by using an observation instrument to determine a specific level of practice. While lab classroom teachers are more advanced in their practice, they do not have to be an “expert.” On the contrary, it is most helpful if lab classroom teachers have a learning disposition themselves and can describe how they have approached ongoing learning in formative assessment. Lab classrooms should also show evidence that students have an active role in the learning process. This might include daily routines such as students co-constructing Success Criteria, conducting effective peer feedback, or supporting student discourse.

Recruit volunteer teachers

Lab classrooms teachers may have a range of responsibilities before and during site visits, including preparing students for sharing their learning with visitors, meeting with visitors to describe the site visit protocols, and debriefing with visitors following their classroom visits. Developing written expectations at each site about what is expected for different roles, including teachers, is helpful to capture time commitments and expectations. Lab classroom teachers are often called upon to share what they are learning with peers, both within their campus and beyond. District leaders may be involved in establishing expectations and aligning this work with internal structures and policies for teacher leadership roles.

Involve and support principals

Principals play an essential role in leading formative assessment and in supporting the instructional changes that ultimately increase student agency. Visitors benefit from understanding precisely what principals are doing to create these structures and opportunities for teacher exploration, learning and support. Principals may develop brief documentation that describes their leadership practices in key areas, such as how formative assessment supports their school vision, systems they’ve put in place to observe and give ongoing feedback to teachers about their emerging practice, and what structures they have in place to support ongoing professional learning for their staff. Visitors want to understand how principals and campus leadership team members lead and support teacher learning, create routines and ongoing opportunities for teacher feedback, and garner resources to support depth and spread of practices over multiple years.

Convene teachers, leaders and academic coaches to develop agreement about what visitors will see and determine site visit protocols

The site visit protocol for demonstration site and lab classroom visits is best created by all those who are going to be involved in the visits – teachers, site leaders, coaches and/or district leaders, and even students. In order to develop an effective site visit protocol, those involved benefit from engaging in developing common language and agreements about formative assessment implementation and what visitors might see. This process, which we call *consensus tuning*, involves the campus team coming to an understanding of how teacher learning emerges in formative assessment, key features of expert practice, and increased understanding about shifts in the student role.

The site visit protocol will:

- Describe the roles and responsibilities for those leading formative assessment classroom lab visits, including roles of district leaders, principals and other campus leaders, coaches, teachers and students.
- Outline a visit calendar with agendas and roles for introductory discussions with visitors, a typical site visit schedule, and follow-up discussions with teachers, students, campus leaders and district leaders.
- Identify readings or artifacts to share with visitors, either before, during or after the site visit.
- Provide guidance to visitors about what to “look for” that is evidence of formative assessment, descriptions of where teachers have developed collective expertise, and information about what teachers and students are currently learning.

Engage students

Students being able to talk about how they are learning, and what has changed in the ways they learn, is one of the most powerful levers for adults to be able to see the impact of formative assessment on the student role. Many site visits include student panels, even in elementary school, which can demonstrate ways students talk about how they learn, and how they value and support learning from peers. Some sites encourage visitors, where appropriate, to ask students questions about how they are learning. This set of questions, below, is adapted from posted questions outside of lab classrooms in Tulsa Public Schools, guiding visitors to ask students about how they are learning.

Questions to Ask Students:

- What are you learning, and will you know when you are successful?
- How are you using the Success Criteria in this lesson?
- What are you seeing/hearing during the lesson that helps you know where you are in your own learning?

Things to Consider as You Observe Student Learning:

- Are students able to name what they’re learning and articulate where they are in the learning process?
- Are Learning Goals and Success Criteria posted and communicated?
- Are Learning Goals and Success Criteria referenced throughout the lesson?
- Are tasks eliciting evidence of student learning?
- What can you tell, as an observer, about where students are in their learning?

