

Setting the Stage for Formative Assessment Part 2: The District's Role

Transcript of Webinar

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Welcome to Setting the Stage for Formative Assessment, Part 2, the district's role. This presentation was developed by the Center for Standards and Assessment Implementation, or CSAI. The webinar was presented live on May 15, 2018. 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 during this presentation.

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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 second in a series of four webinars about how to establish an environment that supports formative assessment in the classroom, or in other words, setting the stage for formative assessment. We organized the series into four levels, or roles, that all work together to establish how students experience formative assessment in the classroom.

Last year, we presented the state's role and discussed 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. In that webinar, we focused on 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.

Today we will consider these similar topics at the district level. The other two roles—school or building level and then the classroom or teacher level—will be examined in future webinars this summer.

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For our webinar today, we have three learning goals. First, is to understand what formative assessment is, its role in a comprehensive assessment system, and its relationship to student outcomes. This learning goal

describes and defines formative assessment and provides reasons for why it's important. Second, we will learn how to develop a vision and long-term plan for formative assessment implementation in your district. And third is to learn how district leaders can establish the culture, structures, and supports for effective professional learning about formative assessment.

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You may find it helpful to print out the user's guide for this webinar, which can be found [here](#). The user's guide is provided to help you use this webinar as a learning tool, either by yourself or with colleagues. We encourage you to pause often to discuss and to work through some of the tools that are included in the guide.

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On page 3, the Preview page lists the three learning goals (in green). Underneath each goal is listed a set of sub goals that are addressed in this webinar. Please take a moment to decide whether each of these sub goals is of great interest or some interest to you. If it is of no interest, don't mark anything. At the end of the webinar you will have an opportunity to self-assess and decide whether you think you have made some progress toward this goal.

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To begin, let's establish first what we mean when we say, "formative assessment." You are going to see four possible definitions of "formative assessment." Think about whether each definition is accurate, inaccurate, or partially accurate.

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If you're following along in the user's guide, you'll find these possible definitions on page 4. Try not to turn the page while you are trying to decide!

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"Choice A: Formative assessments are strategies that teachers use to obtain information about students' learning. Some examples are learning logs, exit tickets, questioning and discussion, conferencing, and rubrics." Is this definition accurate, inaccurate, or partially accurate? If you're working with a group, take a moment to think and discuss. Try not to focus on getting the "right" answer. Rather, focus on which elements in this definition either sound accurate or not accurate. This is intended to be tricky so if you're feeling unsure, you're definitely in the right place.

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"Choice B: Formative assessment provides teachers with early warning signals about students who are falling behind and who may benefit from additional help prior to end-of-year testing. Formative assessment informs decisions about curricular adjustments and professional learning needs." Is this definition accurate, inaccurate, or partially accurate? Again, take a moment to think and discuss. Think about the elements that you think sound accurate or not accurate.

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"Choice C: Formative assessment is a process used by students and teachers during instruction to elicit and use evidence to improve understanding of intended learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners." Is this definition accurate, inaccurate, or partially accurate? Take a moment to think and discuss. Think about the elements that you think sound accurate or not accurate. We're almost done!

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“And, finally, Choice D: Formative assessments are assignments, projects, or tests that provide feedback to students about their achievement on a unit of study.” Is this definition accurate, inaccurate, or partially accurate? Think and discuss. Do any of these elements sound accurate or inaccurate?

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Choice A: This is partially accurate. When we refer to strategies or tasks or tools like this, we’re really talking about evidence-gathering opportunities. That’s not a term we expect you to be familiar with, but you get the idea, that it’s the mechanism that teachers use to get information. It isn’t the content of what you’re learning (like the skills or knowledge). It’s an important piece of formative assessment, but not the entire process. If you spend most of your energy on the mechanism (the tool or strategy), rather than the information that is being gathered, then the data tend to be disconnected and not useful for advancing student learning.

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Choice B: This is inaccurate. These are interim assessments, which we’ll talk about a bit later when we discuss the comprehensive assessment system.

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Choice C: This is accurate! This is a simplified version of the FAST SCASS definition that we’ll go over in detail in just a minute.

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Choice D: This is potentially accurate. This definition really describes classroom summative assessments, which are end-of-unit tests. If these assessments are used formatively, that is, to give feedback to students so that they have a chance to revise and improve, then that is formative. If it’s just a one-shot deal where they get their grade and a few comments about how they did, that’s not formative.

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Let’s go back for a second to Choice A, which turned out to be about evidence-gathering opportunities. The reason we want to highlight this is that, in our experience, this is by far the **most common misconception** of formative assessment. It is very likely that many of your teachers believe that good formative assessment is about checking in with students on a regular basis using a variety of techniques. Again, this is partially true, but this by itself will not improve teacher practice or student learning.

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So now that we reviewed what formative assessment is and what it isn’t, what is the definition that we use in the webinar? We use CCSSO’s FAST SCASS definition, which was updated in 2017.

Formative assessment is defined as a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners.

Notice that this definition of formative assessment is student-centered and occurs during learning and teaching. This definition is also about instruction.

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Quality instruction is important because new college and career ready standards, adopted in the last eight years, focus on students’ deeper learning, more so than previous standards.

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What is deeper learning? Well, in 2012, the National Research Council convened a group of national experts in learning and teaching. In this report, *Education for Life and Work*, the group defined “deeper learning” as the process in which a person can apply what is being learned in one situation to a new situation.

This report, in addition to examining the research on deeper learning and standards that support it, identifies instructional methods that can help students' development of transferable knowledge and skills in a subject area.

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In the National Research Council report, the committee singled out formative assessment as the instructional method that enables deeper learning. To quote the report, “Formative assessment occurs hand in hand with the teaching and learning process and is an integral component of teaching and learning for transfer.”

The quotation on this page is supported by research on the 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.

Perhaps the most cited study that examined the effectiveness of formative assessment was Black and Wiliam's 1998 article which reviewed studies of instructional methods. The authors concluded that formative assessment had an effect size to be medium to large (between .4 to .7), which makes it one of the most effective educational interventions in practice, particularly for low achieving students.

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Black and Wiliam's landmark study has been supported by additional research, namely by a meta-analysis conducted by John Hattie in 2009. Hattie analyzed over 800 studies on effective teaching and found that elements of the formative assessment process – such as student expectations, teacher clarity, and feedback - increased student achievement the most.

The table found on this slide is an excerpt of the over 130 effects related to student achievement that Hattie analyzed. Just a note, effect size is not a percentage but a statistical analysis used to examine a strength of a phenomenon. In general, a medium effect size is between .5 and .8, a large effect size is .8 to 1.2, and a very large effect size is 1.2 and above.

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So formative assessment gets away from the idea of delivering instruction, where students are like mailboxes waiting to be filled with information given by teachers.

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To supporting deeper learning of content through an ongoing process in which teachers and students use evidence of student learning to improve learning and teaching.

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Now that we have a basic definition of formative assessment, we'd like to situate formative assessment in a system of assessments. Thinking about the assessment system provides a clearer understanding of what formative assessment is and what it is not.

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In thinking about assessment and how assessment provides information to help and understand students' learning, we start with a student. This student comes to us in the beginning of the year with the skills and knowledge he or she has. After a year of learning, the student should attain deep learning of college and career ready standards for the grade. To help us understand how students are progressing toward college and career readiness, we use a system of assessments that provide data on student achievement.

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This comprehensive assessment system is comprised of a variety of assessments, each providing different types of data for different uses. For the purposes of this webinar, we'll briefly describe each type of assessment. But for more information, please refer to the citation found on the bottom of the slide.

So starting on the right with end-of-year summative assessments, they provide general information on student achievement for a long period of instruction, typically a year.

Interim or benchmark assessments are administered periodically—often quarterly—over a school year. Information from these assessments are still pretty general to what students can or cannot do. Results generally are used to support school and district data-based decision-making, such as 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.

Classroom summative assessments are often given at the end of a unit and used for grading purposes. 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.

The last two circles on formative assessment are separated into two types, in process formative assessment and formal checks. Formal checks, such as quizzes, class or homework assignments, and presentations, are often given daily and can help teachers and students to look back at what students have learned.

In process formative assessment is distinguished from all other types of assessments in this system by its focus on continuous, immediate action to support teaching and learning. When we talk about formative assessment, we are in this circle, closest to the student.

And a quick word about diagnostic/placement tests. They are given as needed, diagnose strengths and weakness in students existing knowledge and skills, and determine eligibility and placement of students in special programs.

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Another way to think about different types of assessment is to think about the length of the feedback loop in time from the assessment event. In other words, once an assessment is given to a student, how long does it take for useful feedback from that assessment to return to that student?

For many summative assessments, the time the results get back to the student is long; therefore, large-scale national assessments can never provide timely feedback to individual students. Yet another way to think of this is type of assessment is as a product instead of a process.

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Medium length feedback loops, such as interim assessment or performance assessments, still relate to a product. The results can also help students understand where they are in learning past content, such as a grade.

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Formative assessment generally has the shortest distance to travel in time. This is assessment is a process, not a product. Formative assessment provides information for instructional adjustments and evaluation of student's progress of learning in real – or almost real - time. Information from formative assessment provides immediate feedback to students on strengths and weaknesses and where to fill gaps in knowledge and skills.

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So we're going to take a closer look at that green circle closest to the student...

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And talk a little bit about the formative assessment process. 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. Learning goals are often referred to as learning objectives.

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. We provided a brief overview of the formative assessment process in this webinar. More detailed descriptions and examples of it will be provided in the webinars for school leadership and teachers later this summer.

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So far, we have discussed the definition of formative assessment as an instructional process, how it is supported by research, how it fits into a comprehensive assessment system, and very briefly what it looks like when it is implemented at the classroom level. Now we are going to talk about how to look for formative assessment in existing instructional programs. By instructional programs, we mean anything you use to promote learning in your district; some typical examples might be a textbook series or a professional learning initiative. Instructional programs can be big or small; for example, an assembly or workshop can also be evaluated for its quality of formative assessment.

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The “Evaluate” inventory on pages 6 and 7 of the user’s guide lists the four categories we’ll talk about as well as their individual elements. For each of the 20 elements, keep an instructional program in mind, and ask yourself: How well does this program do this element? Remember that many programs will do well in some categories and not others. That doesn’t mean they’re not worthwhile programs; it means that the program probably wasn’t designed with formative assessment in mind. By evaluating it using this inventory, you can pinpoint areas that you can either revise or supplement in order to strengthen its formative assessment qualities. Another way to use this inventory is to compare programs with each other, as you might do during a new textbook adoption or when comparing vendors.

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The four evaluation categories are: **Instructional practice**: in other words, how does this program support what a teacher does with it? **Learning goals**: How does this program establish what is to be learned? **Student involvement**: Does the program explicitly invite and teach students to take part in the learning process? And finally, **equity and classroom culture**: does the program provide access to all and promote an environment that encourages formative assessment?

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For instructional practice, there are seven key elements you should look for when evaluating a program’s formative assessment qualities. Does the program help teachers plan instruction in advance? Does the program support ongoing classroom instruction (in contrast to a one-time learning event)? Is the instruction classroom-based? Does the program assist with collecting evidence of student learning? Does the program assist with analyzing evidence of student learning? Does the program help teachers adjust their instruction in response to this evidence? And, finally, does the program assist teachers in responding to individual students?

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Do the learning goals of the program come from college and career ready standards, or from another set of standards that your district uses? Are the learning goals situated in a logical progression of learning for that content area? And are the learning goals reasonable enough to be accomplished within a lesson? These are some of the important curriculum resources that teachers need in order to implement formative assessment with fidelity and continuity.

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One of the essential aspects of formative assessment that is sometimes underrepresented in programs at times is the need for student involvement. In order to rate well on this inventory, a program must have clear and usable elements that address student involvement. Are students taught to direct their own learning? Do students assess themselves and give and receive peer feedback? Are students taught how to achieve their learning goals? Are students taught to identify any gaps between their own achievement and the desired learning goals? Do students receive actionable feedback from their peers and teachers?

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Formative assessment only works when there is a culture and environment that supports it and is available to everyone. To that end, evaluate the instructional program with this in mind. Do all students benefit? Do all teachers benefit? In other words, we want the program to be accessible and beneficial for as many people as possible. Does the program establish a collaborative and respectful learning environment? Does it encourage students to take risks and make mistakes? And, finally, are students provided with true differentiation – do they have access to multiple modes and opportunities to demonstrate their learning?

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Now that you have some understanding of how you can identify formative assessment in existing instructional programs, in addition to what formative assessment is, why it is important, and how it fits into your assessment system, you can start thinking about how to develop an implementation plan.

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In the user's guide, you will find some suggested action steps for implementation on pages 8 and 9.

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We've grouped these steps into three categories: Establish a vision and plan; lead your district; and provide resources for professional learning. In your particular context, some of these items may be better provided by the state, or at the school level; consider this a starting point to discuss some of the important steps that ought to be considered when implementing formative assessment.

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Formative assessment requires a multiple year commitment. One of the critical aspects that takes time is the fundamental shift in thinking that is required. Many people think of formative assessment as a variety of tests and activities that measure student learning about something. However, once that conception changes and it becomes evident that formative assessment is in fact about the entire process of teaching and learning, the scope and time frame expands. Changing people's thinking about teaching and learning can be a difficult and slow process. We have yet to encounter a state or district that feels that its implementation is complete. Even when a pilot cohort of teachers and administrators is trained, it can take multiple years to scale up throughout the district. And the need for a long-term commitment is pervasive even across different models of implementation, as we will see in these next two examples.

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Our first example is from Colorado. Four years ago, a mid-sized suburban district that had large number of students moving in and out of the district implemented a plan to train its teachers in formative assessment. The impetus for the work began with a new superintendent who had a strong vision of supporting the district with instructional needs. Therefore, district leadership underwent internal discussions on what was the best way to support teachers to support students' learning. Through these discussions, the district settled on formative practice as a way to bring change in classroom learning and teaching.

What's unique about this district is that its leadership decided to be at least six months ahead of its teachers in learning content. This way, leadership could anticipate what might happen during implementation and be more responsive to questions and concerns. The district team completed a 6-month online formative assessment course, and the following year, the course was open to teachers. For the teachers, the district provided time in teachers' schedules so that they could participate PLCs. The PLCs, in turn, became a time when teachers could either take the online modules or train other teachers. Currently the district is working on scaling up formative assessment implementation for all schools and all teachers.

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In Arizona, [click] professional development in formative assessment was initiated by the state department of education because it wanted to support teachers with daily assessment practices. Work with formative assessment has been on-going in the department for at least 4 years. The department sought out multiple partnerships, from non-profit organizations to comprehensive centers to universities, in order to provide content and expertise to districts. To support district roll out of an online formative assessment training

program, district leadership had direct contact with the state department of education for questions and problems. The state also brought district leaders together for a two-day training on formative assessment and a later meeting to share how districts supported participating teachers (e.g., providing planning time, coaching, incentives). This support from the state enabled district leadership to enroll hundreds of teachers in the online training. Districts throughout the state continue with the online modules for beginning teachers and have pursued more training for intermediate and advanced teachers.

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One of the first things we talked about in this webinar is the importance of definitional clarity. Most people have a misconception about formative assessment that it is limited to small tests that you give periodically to gauge progress. Establishing that it is much more than that will take more effort and time than you might imagine. There are two other aspects of understanding and implementing formative assessment that are essential: First is the need for expert knowledge, not only in the formative assessment process but also in the content areas that are being taught. Any professional learning you do in either of these categories will benefit your overall goal of improving formative assessment practice in your district. Second, as we mentioned earlier, is the critical requirement that you involve students in the process. This is an integral aspect of what formative assessment is, and explicitly training both teachers and students in increasing and improving student involvement should be at the forefront of your vision and definition of formative assessment.

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As a district leader, you are in an ideal position to see how formative assessment is already being accomplished across your schools. Looking carefully at existing programs for their formative assessment elements—which we looked at in depth in the previous section of this webinar—is the first step. Build on what you know by identifying gaps, and supplementing or revising your programs to strengthen their formative assessment qualities. We encourage you to use this evaluation process to dig deep into the program; do not take it on faith that any program “does” formative assessment. Finally, we encourage you to look first to your existing programs in order to improve buy-in from your stakeholders. You have already invested a great deal of resources into purchasing and implementing these programs; the people who paid for and who spent time learning them will appreciate being able to use the best of what they already know. It is a great way to start the conversation about formative assessment.

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Remember that you are not alone in your endeavor. External institutions and partners are available to help you with this work. Once you connect with other districts and organizations, you will likely encounter many examples. To start, we will illustrate each type of partnership with how that looks in an example state, Michigan.

State departments of education. In Michigan, the department of education leads the state’s efforts in formative assessment. The department provides face-to-face training of coaches throughout the state. The department also has materials and resources on their webpage for districts to reference and download.

Universities. Michigan State University provides research and evaluation of formative assessment initiatives and conducts surveys of teachers, coaches, and administrators. These data help the Michigan Department of Education, districts, and other stakeholders understand the successes and challenges of implementation.

Nonprofit and for-profit education organizations. Districts can also partner with nonprofit or for-profit organizations. For example, the Michigan Assessment Consortium supports educators in the state with training

materials, expertise, resources, and tools on formative assessment. Also, CCSSO, a national, nonprofit organization provides formative assessment resources and expertise to states.

Lastly, content centers, like CSAI, and comprehensive centers help consult with state departments of education and districts on implementation issues. We often help provide additional research and training, develop resources, or help bring organizations together.

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Partners can bring a variety of resources to your district. First, and most obviously, is expertise. There are people and organizations that specialize in formative assessment who can train or consult with you. Second, these external partners often provide content, such as online modules, books, guides, tools, and training videos. Third, an external partner can help you ask good evaluation questions about whether your program is having impact, and help you track your progress. Finally, external partners can often bring you into existing networks of other districts, states, or organizations that are trying to accomplish similar goals.

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District leaders can build a culture and community that is promotes formative assessment in the schools. First, as we saw in the Colorado example earlier, you can be the lead learners. Go through the training yourself, and model formative assessment practices in the professional learning sessions you develop and lead. Build leadership capacity by identifying and training those instructional leaders who will embrace your vision and implement throughout the entire district. Finally, be sure to regularly and clearly communicate your vision and action steps to all your stakeholders, including students and parents.

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Teachers often want to do this work, and they need instructional resources to make it happen. First, there needs to be a clear instructional path via standards and learning progressions. The extent to how much district support is provided varies widely. Some districts provide very little, leaving almost all instructional decisions to the schools. Other districts provide specific units of study and performance assessments in which the learning progressions are already articulated. Also, all stakeholders need to understand how formative assessment fits into the district and state's comprehensive assessment system.

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More concretely, teachers need time. They need regular meetings of sufficient time to learn, discuss, explore, implement, and get feedback. Second, and related to the first, is funding for resources. Time is normally the largest expenditure, but consider also materials such as professional learning modules, trainers, and books. Finally, establish support structures for both teachers and leaders; these could be online groups, regular face to face meetings, conferences and workshops, newsletters and other communication tools.

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On page 10 of the user's guide, you will see a "Reflect and self-assess" activity. We encourage you to go back to the Preview page on page 3 and see if you have made any progress towards your earlier learning goals. Then we provide some suggestions for how you might expand your learning in future. This process, incidentally, is formative and we hope that by going through the process yourself you can see how internalizing and practicing a structure like this would be helpful not only to yourself as a learner but to the teachers and students in your district.

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All of the studies and documents we've referred to in this webinar are listed on the References page. The first link is to a video about Virginia's implementation that we showed in the original webinar but did not include here. This is one of a series of videos about one implementation of formative assessment.

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This concludes the district role in setting the stage for formative assessment. Our next two webinars will provide information about establishing formative assessment practice at the site level, such as leadership and learning communities, and teacher practices within the classroom.

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Thank you for joining us today for this webinar. 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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