

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: January 8, 2013

Published in Print: January 9, 2013, as **Formative Assessment's 'Advocatable Moment'**

Includes correction(s): January 14, 2013

COMMENTARY

Waving the Flag for Formative Assessment

By **W. James Popham**

Every educator knows what "a teachable moment" is. It's the brief period of time when events serendipitously conspire to teach students something that otherwise might be difficult for them to learn. Teachable moments are really quite special, and they don't come along all that often. A teacher who wastes a teachable moment, therefore, commits a pedagogical sin of omission.

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Interestingly, American educators are now on the cusp of a different sort of special moment. In this instance, it stems from a unique historical occasion during which teachers' adoption of the formative-assessment process should be advocated with both honesty and unparalleled zeal. Yes, this is formative assessment's "advocatable moment."

First off, it is important to recognize that formative assessment works. That's right: Ample research evidence is now at hand to indicate emphatically that when the formative-assessment process is used, students learn better—lots better. This should come as no surprise, for the essence of formative assessment is surely commonsensical.

Formative assessment is simply a planned process wherein teachers, or their students, use assessment-elicited evidence of student learning to decide whether to make changes in what they're currently doing. Teachers find out if they need to adjust their ongoing instruction. Students find out if they need to alter the ways in which they're trying to learn. Formative assessment is, at bottom, an ends-means process in which teachers and/or students rely on assessment consequences (the ends) to decide whether any adjustments are warranted in what they're doing (the means). It's really not surprising that formative assessment works so well.

What is surprising is how few U.S. teachers use the process.

It does work, and it can make teachers more effective. Yet, although considerable rhetoric has been expended in recent years calling for teachers to employ formative assessment, its usage in our classrooms is meager. Nonetheless, two events now taking place in American education provide us with a unique opportunity to remedy this shortcoming. In fact, they set the stage for a special moment when education leaders of all stripes can legitimately advocate the use of formative assessment.

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Let's briefly consider what they are.

The first event stems from adoption of the Common Core State Standards by almost all our states. Not surprisingly, commercial publishers are inundating U.S. educators with instructional materials ostensibly directed at promoting student mastery of the standards. But let's be honest, we really won't know the true nature of the common core's success until the two assessment consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC—complete their test-building, by the spring of 2015. Only then will U.S. educators know with certainty how the common core has been operationalized, and whether students have mastered the content.

And here's where formative assessment can prove beneficial to the nation's teachers.

Remember, formative assessment helps students master curricular targets. Rather than asking teachers to guess about what the common core really means, shouldn't we urge teachers to sharpen their instructional skills through the use of formative assessment? Then, when the assessment-consortia tests are released, those teachers can focus their more potent instruction on the skills and knowledge the tests are measuring. The choice for educators shouldn't be between curricular guessing and becoming more instructionally skilled.

A second event that's setting the stage for full-on advocacy of formative assessment is the installation of more-stringent teacher-evaluation procedures throughout the United States. Spurred by federal incentives, including the Race to the Top grants, state officials have recently adopted teacher-evaluation systems in which student growth must be "a significant factor." Indeed, in many states, fully 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation will hinge on student performance on state or other achievement tests. Once again, this is an instance where formative assessment can help teachers.

Remember, formative assessment works. When it is used, students learn better. By using this assessment-rooted instructional process, teachers can increase the test-based achievements of their students. Regardless of the particular array of achievement tests used by a given state to evaluate its teachers, the teachers who employ formative assessment are apt to get their students to perform better on those tests. "Student growth" will be demonstrated on the tests because, in fact, student growth will have occurred.



These two stage-setting educational events are nontrivial developments. The adoption of the common standards and the explosion of federally initiated teacher-evaluation programs are both likely to make whopping differences in what goes on in our schools. Teachers who are adept at carrying out the formative-assessment process, therefore, will be better positioned to deal with either of these precedent-setting events.

This is an extraordinary moment in time when leaders of American education can legitimately advocate that teachers should adopt formative assessment because it will be in teachers' best interests to do so. Happily, if teachers follow this advice, those who benefit most will be their students.

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