



# STRONG TEAMS, STRONG RESULTS

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT HELPS  
TEACHER TEAMS STRENGTHEN EQUITY

BY NANCY LOVE AND MICHELLE CROWELL

**A**t a diverse elementary school, a grade-level planning team is meeting about an upcoming lesson and creating an exit ticket, a brief formative assessment tool to check for students'

understanding. School administrators have recently asked special educators and language development specialists to become part of the collaborative team.

As the group begins working on the exit ticket, one special education teacher expresses concern: "My students

couldn't do that. It's too hard for them. They will get discouraged."

Her teammate pushes back gently, "I think with modifications this assessment can work for all our kids. Let's see if we can modify the task to make it more accessible to your

## Teams can strengthen courage, conviction, and cultural proficiency to make progress toward equity, one team meeting at a time.

students. We want all our students to hit the standard.”

Another teacher chimes in, “The modifications might work better for our English language learners, too.”

The team creates two versions of the assessment, and teachers choose which version to give to their own students. The following week, they analyze the results together and plan for reteaching and extension based on the results.

The special education teachers are elated to discover how well their students performed. “We just weren’t expecting enough of them,” one teacher reflected. “Our special education students are excited, too. They know they’re doing the same work as their classmates.”

### ROLE OF TEACHER TEAMS

Sitting in our schools right now is one of the most powerful levers we have for deepening equity: teacher teams focused on developing collective expertise in high-leverage, equity-promoting practices.

One conversation at a time, teams like the one in the vignette above, a composite of teams we have observed over time, chip away at low expectations, racism, and cultural biases that have marginalized special

education students, English language learners, students of color, and others who have not traditionally been served well by schools.

While many schools have a general orientation toward equity and “all students achieving,” those values come to life when team members confront specific limiting beliefs about individual students in the context of their work together on formative assessment. Working together in this way, teams can strengthen courage, conviction, and cultural proficiency to make progress toward equity, one team meeting at a time.

This was the approach of the Madeline English School, a culturally and linguistically diverse K-8 school with 825 students in Everett, Massachusetts. For years, standardized test results at the school showed below-average growth. In particular, special education students’ and English language learners’ achievement was flat. Teachers examined assessment data, but it was often too little too late, occurring after the students who took the tests had moved on.

Then, in spring 2017, the school launched a partnership with Research for Better Teaching to implement data coaching, a yearlong professional

learning program sponsored by the Five District Partnership. The partnership is a network of urban districts in greater Boston, funded by the Massachusetts Network Initiative grant from New Venture Fund.

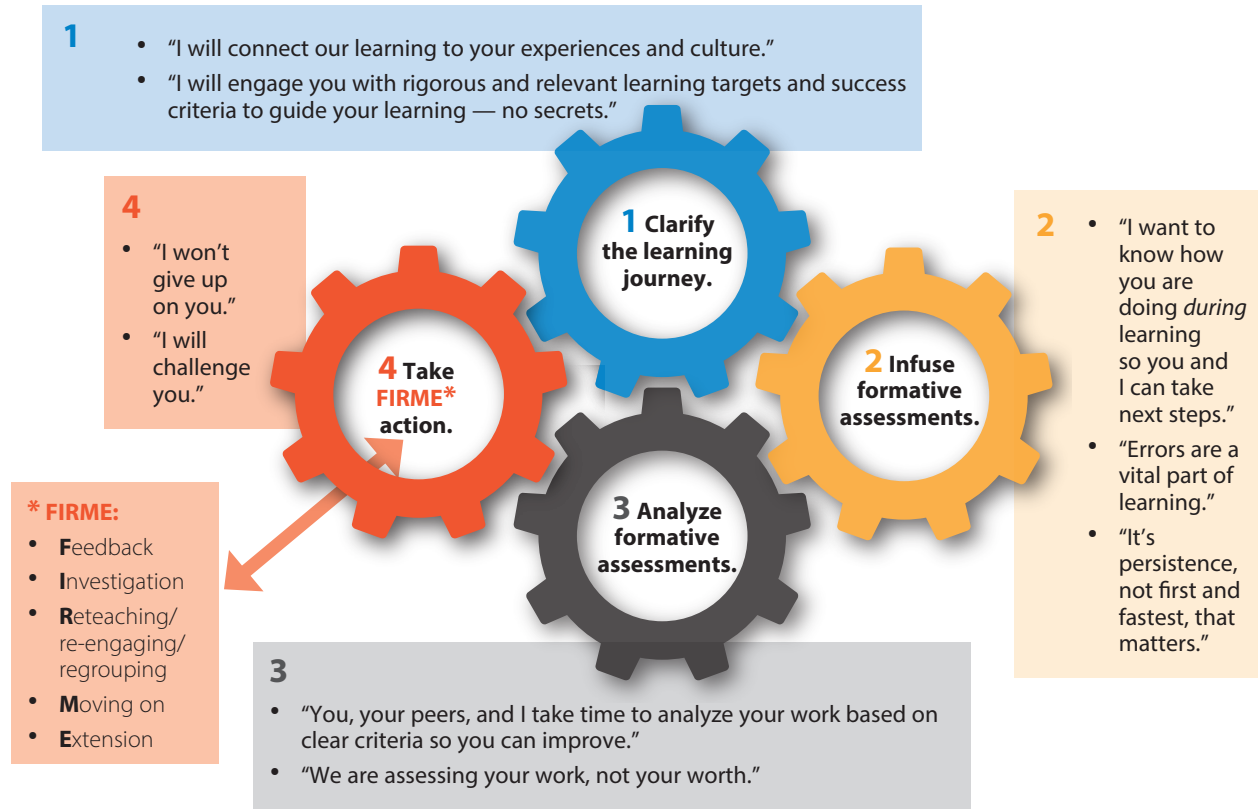
Over the course of a year, the school became committed to an equity-based approach to formative assessment and data-driven instruction.

Common planning time team meetings transformed from unproductive conversations to focused analysis of common exit tickets, careful planning for immediate next steps for reteaching and extension, and shared accountability for taking action in the classroom. The divide between special and general educators dissolved as teachers became collaborators in holding all students to high standards.

Special educators and language development specialists became regular contributors at team meetings, sharing strategies for reteaching, modifying standards-based exit tickets aligned with general education assessments, and analyzing student formative assessment results with their colleagues.

Mindsets shifted as teachers challenged each other and changed practices, and the school began to see positive impacts on students. On the

**THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT FOR RESULTS CYCLE WITH HIGH-EXPECTATIONS MESSAGES**



most recent diagnostic assessments, Grade 7 special education students’ growth spurred, exceeding the targeted growth expectations by an average of 160% in reading and 44% in mathematics from the middle to the end of the academic year. Grade 4 special education students and English language learners exceeded targets by 21% in reading and 13% in mathematics.

The school’s Five District Partnership Benchmark Assessments showed improvements in all grades for all students, with grade 7 making the greatest gains of almost 20 percentage points.

“The special education students are really benefitting from our team work,” special educator Christine Downing said. “Before, they had this perception that they were dumb. Now they know that they were dumb. Now they know that we are going to push them and that

they can push themselves.”

What alchemy made this change happen? Four key ingredients were:

1. Professional learning for team leaders and administrators that is based in a practical framework with protocols for team learning and equity;
2. Thoughtful rollout;
3. A regular structure and schedule for team meetings; and
4. Consistent follow-through by school leaders.

**A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR EQUITY**

Data coaching is a team-based approach to helping schools use formative assessment data to drive short cycles of improvement. It is grounded in the knowledge that strengthening cultural proficiency is essential for making this process work.

“We have learned through our experience in the Using Data Process that issues of race/ethnicity, class, culture, gender, and other differences ... cannot and ... should not be avoided when examining data and engaging in collaborative inquiry. Our responses and reactions to these differences deeply affect how we interpret data and have a profound effect on student learning,” say the authors of *The Data Coach’s Guide to Improving Learning for All Students* (Love, Stiles, Mundry, & DiRanna, 2008, p. 92.)

The focus of professional learning in data coaching is on the Formative Assessment for Results Cycle (see diagram above), a framework to guide teacher teams in developing collective expertise in classroom formative assessment and the equity-promoting practices and messages that support its effective use.

TAKING FIRME ACTION		
Action in response to formative assessment	What it is	Why it matters for equity
FEEDBACK	Provide objective, descriptive information about students' performance relative to standards and success criteria.	Teams focused on equity learn about both effective practice and "wise feedback." "Wise feedback" (Cohen & Steele, 2002) helps combat stereotypes of intellectual inferiority among students of color by combining honest, direct feedback linked to standards alongside assurances that the student is capable and can improve performance.
INVESTIGATION	Examine student thinking in daily diagnostic questions and discussions.	In the words of math teacher Jessica Salem, "Now we ask our students to explain their thinking. Then I get to understand their thought process. They always have a reason. Once we understand, we can help them correct errors."
RETEACHING, RE-ENGAGING, REGROUPING	Use different approaches for students who need another opportunity to master a learning target.	Students with different learning needs and backgrounds do not all learn in the same way. Teams committed to equity collaborate to expand their teaching and grouping repertoires and make the best match for individual students.
MOVING ON	A legitimate step after the previous step when most, even if not all, students have achieved proficiency.	Equity means ensuring all students have access to a rigorous curriculum so the curriculum does not to grind to a halt for one or two students. However, if some students have not mastered a concept or skill, it is important to have a plan for how they will do so.
EXTENSION	Provide additional challenges to students who master learning targets before others.	Extension ensures that all students are continually learning and stretching. "Now our students who reach a standard before others know they are going to be challenged," said reading coach Mary Beth Benedetto.

The cycle includes four steps. Embedded in each are high-expectations messages that teachers continually communicate to students both through their words and their actions so that students can internalize the growth mindset and their teacher's belief that they can succeed.

When teachers and students regularly experience this cycle and these messages, they chip away at limiting beliefs such as "mistakes are a sign of weakness," "speed counts," and "only the few bright can achieve at high levels" (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2018, p. 410).

Each step of the cycle requires that teachers are curious about and continually deepening their understanding of each of their students' cultures, experiences, and thinking while monitoring their own biases and assumptions.

### Embedded in each step are high-expectations messages that teachers continually communicate to students.

The steps are:

#### 1. Clarify the learning journey.

In this step, teachers focus and motivate learning by communicating specific success criteria to their students. Success criteria level the playing field by making explicit what success looks like through checklists, rubrics, and exemplars, so students don't have to guess what's on the teacher's mind — a phenomenon that tends to privilege students whose backgrounds are similar to teachers'. According to John Hattie's (2017) research, this kind of teacher clarity has a .75 effect size on student

outcomes. (For comparison, .4 represents a typical year of student growth.)

Also in this step, teachers gather information about students and their backgrounds through surveys, interviews, and one-on-one relationships with individual students so they can identify culturally relevant examples and metaphors and connect them to the content being taught.

#### 2. Infuse formative assessments.

In this step, teachers weave formative assessments throughout instruction, using carefully crafted diagnostic questions that align with learning targets, assess success criteria, and surface gaps or errors in student thinking.

When teachers and students use assessments to make timely adjustments in teaching and learning tactics, they can effectively double the speed of

learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). These assessments can take the form of quick quizzes, exit tickets, responses to writing prompts, or entries in science or math journals.

In grade-level teams, teachers work together to craft common diagnostic questions, road-test them with students, and bank those that worked well for future use. In vertical teams, assessments are not common but align with learning progressions within and between grades and thus are relevant for all teachers on the team.

In this step, teachers are mindful of creating diagnostic questions that are as free from racial, cultural, and socioeconomic biases (Popham, 2017) as possible.

**3. Analyze formative assessments.**

This step is about analyzing results frequently (ideally, daily or weekly). Individually, teachers might do this on the fly, quickly sorting student work to determine who’s got it and who doesn’t, and regrouping or reteaching accordingly. In a team, teachers use protocols to take a deeper dive into student work to determine whether the success criteria are met or not and plan for next instructional steps.

Understanding students’ cultures comes into play in making accurate interpretations of the meaning of the data.

For example, one teacher team analyzed results of a mathematics assessment where students were asked to estimate the answer. The team was surprised to discover that, when disaggregating data by race, Asian students performed worse than other racial groups.

As they dug deeper, they discovered that these students had estimation skills, but they also had a cultural bias against estimating and favored computing accurately. Without honoring and addressing these students’ assumptions,

teachers were not likely to help them improve.

**4. Take FIRME action.**

FIRME stands for five actions teachers can take in response to formative assessment results to improve instruction in ways that meet students’ needs. (See table on p. 37 for more information.)

Together, the four steps of the Formative Assessment for Results Cycle and their embedded high-expectations messages achieve what John Hattie (2012) refers to as “visible learning” or “students’ assessment capabilities” (p. 141), where students are clear about goals and success criteria, self-assess their progress, and take next steps in their learning, thus moving from dependent to independent, self-directed learners.

While important for all students, these practices are a vital for marginalized learners, who, Zaretta Hammond argues, need an ally to help “dependent learners begin and stay on the arduous path toward independent learners” (Hammond, 2015, p. 89).

**STRUCTURES AND SUPPORT FOR SUCCESS**

At Madeline English School, this work is supported by three additional key elements: thoughtful rollout, structures and schedules, and leadership team follow-through.

**Thoughtful rollout.** After engaging in learning about the Formative Assessment for Results Cycle, the school team needed to contextualize the professional learning to the school and, as one member said, focus on “what works for our building.” They prioritized workshop content they would deliver to the whole staff.

The math and reading coaches and assistant principal then developed presentations in four chosen topic areas and delivered them starting in October during each grade-level

common planning time meeting. This was so successful that, by January, teachers at all grade levels confidently facilitated common planning time meetings themselves and followed data coaching protocols, with guidance and expertise provided by the reading and mathematics coaches.

**Structures and schedules.** For these efforts to work, teachers need dedicated and regular meeting times. Teachers meet by grade level once (grades K-2) or twice (grades 3-8) in an eight-day cycle and are joined by special educators, language development specialists, interventionists, and coaches. In grades 7-8, teachers meet in vertical teams by content area.

**Leadership team follow-through.** The leadership team went beyond creating structure and meeting schedules. They followed through with regular attendance at team meetings, classroom observations, and review of team documentation.

For example, math coach Howard Tuttmann, reading coach Mary Beth Benedetto, and assistant principal Michelle Crowell visited classrooms daily to follow up on topics discussed during common planning time and celebrate successes of individual teachers and students.

In addition, all teacher teams shared formative assessments and results with Crowell and coaches through Google Classroom and Google Forms. This helped the leadership team track progress and teachers stay accountable to each other. Teachers appreciated the structure, schedule, and follow-up. As Tiffany Boakye, 4th-grade teacher, said, “Our administrators are the backbone that has made this successful. ... Because they are so passionate about it, they made us passionate about it.”

**A CLIMATE OF HIGH ACHIEVEMENT**

At Madeline English School,

passion and persistence resulted in a climate of high achievement for all that permeates the school and is accompanied by encouraging test results, especially for special education students and English language learners.

With the right combination of professional learning on formative assessment practices and the structures and follow-through to support those practices, teacher teams are showing it is possible to create equity breakthroughs in as little as one year.

As reading coach Mary Beth Benedetto puts it, “The impact of our collaboration on equity has been huge. It used to be special education teachers and students felt isolated. Now all the teachers are thinking about all of our kids.”

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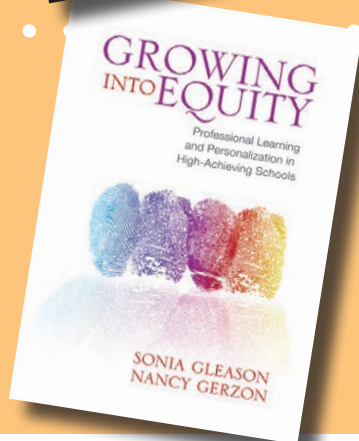
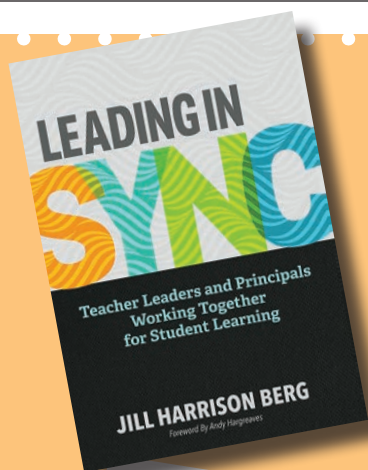
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