

# Research Teachers



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"This article is one of a series intended to help ETFO members become more aware of current research findings directly relevant to teaching in elementary schools."

## # 2 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING

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We now have compelling research indicating that formative assessment may be the most significant single factor in raising the academic achievement of all students and especially that of lower-achieving students. Every teacher needs to consider how the principles of formative assessment can be applied in her or his work.

Formative assessment provides teachers with evidence of the progress of student learning. Rather than taking place after classroom activities to see what has been learned, formative assessment helps to guide students to make improvements during the course of learning. It also informs teachers as to how to support individual students or to alter classroom instruction.

Formative assessment can take many forms. It should focus on what students know and can do and provide them with suggestions for improving their learning rather than focusing only on what they are unable to do. Thus, pupils can begin to see themselves as successful or potentially successful. Research suggests that formative assessment that prompts students towards improvement helps to create a classroom culture of success.

But what does formative assessment look like? My data from 500 Ontario teachers of grade 7 and 8 mathematics show that teachers use a wider range of assessment strategies to get a sense of students' understanding than they do for a report card mark. Case studies of grade 7 and 8 teachers and research with Professional Learning Communities of teachers of grades 4 to 8 show that such things as quizzes, conferencing, portfolios, observation and focused questioning, listening, and responding are being used in many Ontario classrooms to help to give teachers a sense of students' understanding and suggest next steps to teachers and students. For instance, a teacher may use short quizzes to provide formative feedback. Rather than give students marks, she writes comments on the quizzes about what areas they understand and the areas they still need to work on. This helps her to see where to go in her teaching as well. Another example would be

using conferencing with students and asking them to discuss their work, sometimes individually or with a group. The teacher asks questions such as “Tell me about your work, what were you thinking when you did this?” Another teacher states that before a unit he puts students into groups and gives them an exploration activity “so that they can pull from all of their prior knowledge and they do it on chart paper and we put it up and we just discuss what strategies they’re already using before we get into the unit. It helps me see what they already know.” He also recognizes that this is an opportunity for peer assessment as “their peers are giving them feedback on what they did and could they have started in a different place or done it an easier or faster way.”

In summary, formative assessment plays a significant role in improving student learning. In all grades and subjects there are ways in which teachers can help students see where they need to improve outside the framework of grades and marks, with very positive effects on student achievement.

## Further Reading

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