An ASCD Professional Learning Community Guide for Transformative Assessment

This guide is intended to be used by a professional learning community (PLC) in conjunction with *Transformative Assessment*, a book by W. James Popham dealing exclusively with formative assessment. Although *Transformative Assessment* will supply the bulk of the content regarding formative assessment, it is up to each PLC to decide which specific goals related to formative assessment its members will pursue.

Transformative Assessment contains seven chapters, all of which address a number of readily identifiable elements, such as steps to follow or points to consider. Typically, there are between three and five such elements in each chapter. (Chapter 2, for example, provides a four-step strategy for educators who wish to build a learning progression; Chapter 5 describes three key elements of implementing a classroom climate shift.) The PLC may opt for pre-meeting assignments, whereby one or two members of the group agree to lead the next meeting's discussion of particular features of a chapter. Whereas all members of a PLC might be obliged to read (or review) a given chapter and be familiar with its contents, this procedural approach requires selected members to think hard about particular points before the meeting date and then facilitate the PLC group discussion.

The author recommends that a PLC devote two successive meetings to each of the book's chapters. Scheduling two meetings of 60 to 90 minutes' duration per month would permit a PLC to complete its study of this book in a single school year.

Using This Guide

This guide identifies key content in each of *Transformative Assessment*'s seven chapters that the author believes merits attention during a PLC meeting. It also identifies two or more add-on options that the PLC might wish to carry out in conjunction with its focus on the particular chapter's contents. Because the specific way a given PLC operates will depend on the nature of the particular educators who form the group, the educational context in which that PLC operates, the amount of meeting time available, and the focus of their particular group, this guide supplies a range of possible approaches in the hope that members of any PLC will (1) choose from those procedural options, (2) modify those options to suit its particular approach, or (3) come up with

totally different procedures. Without question, the procedural particulars adopted by a particular PLC should be the ones that make the most sense to the members of that PLC.

Chapter 1: Formative Assessment: *What, Why, and Whether*

Key Content

This chapter addresses three important questions: (1) why so many educators have become entranced with formative assessment, (2) what formative assessment actually is, and (3) whether there is sufficient merit in formative assessment so teachers should install it in their own classrooms. By the close of the PLC's consideration of this chapter, all members should have defensible answers to these three questions. Group members should devote substantial attention to the arguments the author makes: Does his explanation of educators' recent embrace of formative assessment ring true? Is his definition of formative assessment clear, and does it diverge from group members' prior understanding of the term? Is the author's case for adopting or advocating formative assessment sufficiently persuasive?

Add-On Options

1. *Is It or Isn't It Formative Assessment?* Each PLC member might bring two index cards to the first PLC meeting focused on Chapter 1, with each card describing an instructional situation in which formative assessment *is or isn't* being used: an example of formative assessment in action or a non-example of formative assessment. (The vignette's author should not indicate on the index card whether formative assessment is or isn't depicted.) A volunteer moderator should collect the cards and read them aloud, one vignette at a time. After a vignette is presented, each member of the PLC should indicate (perhaps on scratch paper) whether the situation being described *is or isn't* a legitimate instance of formative assessment. At that point, the person who created the vignette should indicate whether the vignette was intended to be an instance of formative assessment as defined in Chapter 1, with discussion to follow. Any disagreements among PLC members should be resolved by a group vote.

2. *Definition Derby*. Members of the group might agree to ask a given number of colleagues (perhaps a half-dozen) to explain what they think formative assessment is. (If the PLC is being carried out in a school, members of the group should consider asking educators who are not on staff at their school, chiefly to avoid imposing too much on their colleagues.) At a designated meeting of the PLC, members should share their findings, tallying and discussing the nature and frequency of these definitions to identify commonly held views of what formative assessment is and the potential ramifications of these views.

3. *Review of the Black and Wiliam Articles*. Because the 1998 article by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam in the *Phi Delta Kappan* has been so influential in stimulating interest in formative assessment, and because their 1998 meta-analysis appearing in *Assessment in Education* is often cited as the empirical underpinning of today's formative assessment movement, certain PLC members might volunteer to locate one or both of the Black and Wiliam 1998 articles (cited in the references of *Transformative Assessment*), and then bring those articles (and/or summaries of them) to a PLC meeting to increase group members' familiarity with these articles' content.

Chapter 2: Frameworks for Formative Assessment: *Learning Progressions*

Key Content

PLC members interested in employing formative assessment properly must understand a learning progression's role in supporting the gathering of assessment-elicited evidence to support adjustment decisions. They should reach an understanding of (1) what a learning progression is and isn't; (2) why learning progressions are truly indispensable to the sensible implementation of formative assessment; (3) how to build a learning progression, including the various considerations to make when selecting and sequencing "building blocks" of enabling knowledge and subskills; and (4) what a finished learning progression looks like. Group members who wish to become skilled in developing their own learning progressions or evaluation the learning progressions of others) should devote substantial attention to the author's four-step strategy for building learning progressions.

1. *A Group-Built Learning Progression*. PLC members may wish to attempt a collaboratively-created learning progression by following the author's four recommended steps. For the purposes of group analysis, it's best to elect a modest curricular aim, perhaps the kind that students could master after only an hour or two of instruction. (PLCs might consider taking on Madeline Hunter's favorite learning progression example: the skills and enabling knowledge necessary to make change from a five-dollar bill.)

2. *A Solo-Spawned Learning Progression*. Some PLC members may be more willing to create a learning progression they can actually use in their own classes. Between sessions focused on Chapter 2, volunteers might create these progressions and then bring in copies for group analysis, including a discussion of the grain size of building blocks, their sequence, and their assessment potential.

3. *Reviews of Others' Learning Progressions*. Members of the PLC might locate and critique one or more learning progressions created by others. The paper by Margaret Heritage cited in the references for *Transformative Assessment*, for example, contains several learning progressions worthy of group scrutiny. Copies of such progressions could be secured, duplicated, and then evaluated by a PLC. The group's analysis should include a focus on the grain size of building blocks, their sequence, and their assessment potential.

Chapter 3: Level 1 Formative Assessment: *Teachers' Instructional Adjustments*

Key Content

This chapter reintroduces the four levels of formative assessment, addresses the distinction between instruction and formative assessment, and then focuses on the four steps of Level 1 formative assessment, a strategy for improving the quality of classroom instruction: (1) identifying adjustment occasions, (2) selecting assessments, (3) establishing adjustment triggers, and (4) making instructional adjustments. The four steps set forth in this chapter are intended to provide a template for teachers. PLCs should discuss each step in detail, working toward an understanding of why each step is necessary and how each step might be carried out in the classroom.

1. *Planning One Step at a Time*. A subgroup of the PLC might think through how they would follow the four steps of Level 1 formative assessment to install it in their classrooms (if they are teachers) or help teachers install it (if they are administrators). Having drafted a step-by-step implementation plan, subgroup members should rejoin the rest of the PLC, describe the procedures they've identified, and lead a discussion of the "real-world appropriateness" of the four steps.

2. *Step-Taking*. Particular PLC members might implement one or more of the four steps, then relate to their PLC colleagues what had transpired during these implementation efforts. Any of the four Level 1 steps would be suitable for this add-on activity, but a PLC undertaking this activity should bring copies of any relevant materials to the PLC meeting so that all members of the group can understand how the activities functioned.

3. *Traditional Classroom Assessment Options*. One or more member of the group might volunteer identify the sorts of traditional evidence-gathering assessments familiar to many (but not all) educators, and then lead a discussion on the merits of these tactics.

4. *Novel Classroom Assessment Tactics*. In Chapter 3, the author identifies and briefly describes several atypical assessment procedures (e.g., the traffic-signal technique). Different PLC members might volunteer to gather more information on one or more innovative assessment approaches, and then present on the tactics' strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 4: Level 2 Formative Assessment: Students' Learning Tactic Adjustments

Key Content

This chapter stresses the important differences between Level 1 formative assessment (wherein a teacher decides if instruction should be adjusted) and Level 2 formative assessment (wherein a teacher encourages students to decide if they should adjust their own learning tactics). PLCs should work toward an understanding of what learning tactics are; the roles of the students and the teacher in Level 2 formative assessment;

the three curricular clarifications teachers must make; and the four steps of Level 2 formative assessment: (1) considering adjustment occasions, (2) considering assessments, (3) considering adjustment triggers, and (4) considering and adjusting learning tactics. As with the analogous teacher activities involved in Level 1 formative assessment, PLC members should discuss each of these Level 2 steps in detail, working toward an understanding of why each step is necessary. What must teachers do to help students think through the merits of their own learning tactics and make wise adjustment decisions?

Add-On Options

1. *Curricular Clarifying*. Because the teacher's clarification of curricular aims is critical to the proper functioning of Level 2 formative assessment, PLC members might try to carry out one or more of the three curricular-clarifying activities described in Chapter 4. Volunteer teacher members of the PLC might try one of these three activities with their own students, and then report to the group on the success of those clarification efforts.

2. *Stepping Out*. A few members of the PLC might think through how the four steps of Level 2 formative assessment could be carried out in their classrooms, or, if possible, actually try out one or more of those steps in class, and then report back to the PLC on the outcome of these efforts.

Chapter 5: Level 3 Formative Assessment: *Classroom Climate Shift*

Key Content

This chapter focuses on establishing and maintaining a classroom climate that's informed by assessment. PLC members should focus on the author's explanation of what Level 3 formative assessment is, what it requires, and why it's worth implementing, then and go on to examine the three dimensions of a classroom climate shift: a change in teacher and student perceptions regarding (1) learning expectations, (2) who is responsible for learning, and (3) the role of classroom assessment. The PLC will also want to focus on the author's five suggested steps teachers can take to increase the likelihood of Level 3 success.

1. *Getting Shifty*. PLC volunteers might decide how they would go about effecting change in any of the three climate dimensions described.

2. *Activity Activation*. Members of the group, perhaps in pairs or in subgroups, might analyze the nature of each of the five suggested activities for promoting a meaningful shift in classroom climate, then describe to the entire PLC how the implementation of such activities might (or might not) contribute a classroom climate more in line with that being sought in Level 3 formative assessment.

Chapter 6: Level 4 Formative Assessment: *Schoolwide Implementation*

Key Content

This chapter focuses on Level 4 formative assessment, the schoolwide and even districtwide expansion of one or more of the other levels of formative assessment. The author suggests two implementation strategies, ideally used in combination: professional development and teacher learning communities. The PLC's focus on professional development should center on the three emphases articulated: (1) achieving definitional clarity of what formative assessment means, (2) relying on assessment-elicited evidence to help teachers and students make improvement-focused adjustment decisions, and (3) appraisals of the degree to which particular formative assessment variations are supported by research and reason. As the existence of the PLC suggests group members are already pursing the second strategy, members might reflect on how the group's activities are furthering their understanding of formative assessment and discuss ways to combine current efforts with professional development activities.

Add-On Options

1. *Plan a Professional Development Triumph*. One add-on activity worth considering might call for a small group of the PLC's members to develop a formal plan for a professional development activity that, over time, would encourage a substantial number of educators in a school or in a district office to adopt one or more of the levels of formative assessment described in *Transformative Assessment*. An

attempt should be made to attend to the three considerations related to such programs that were identified in the chapter.

2. *A "Do-Over" PLC*. Suppose that there was an opportunity to start again with the creation and implementation of a PLC focused on formative assessment. How would that activity be different, or the same, as the PLC in which the group currently finds itself? One or more PLC members might address themselves to this question, and then report to the group as a way of strengthening future PLCs.

Chapter 7: Formative Assessment: *What It Can't Do*

Key Content

The message of the book's final chapter is a simple but significant one: Even though there is compelling evidence and ample experience to assure educators that appropriately implemented formative assessment can help students learn more effectively, teachers should not expect that the learning dividends they see in class will necessarily translate into higher test scores. PLC members should discuss the two kinds of accountability that will be insensitive to the detection of instructional quality and reach an understanding of why, if teachers find themselves working in settings where instructionally insensitive accountability tests are in place, the progress in their students' learning likely catalyzed by formative assessment is unlikely to be detectable on such tests. PLC members should then turn their attention to the kind of accountability tests that are likely to accurately measure formative assessment-aided improvement in learning: those that are both instructionally supportive (in the sense that they help stimulate better instruction) and instructionally sensitive (in the sense that they help us accurately determine the quality of instruction).

Add-On Options

1. *Explaining to One's Colleagues*. One useful activity might be for a subgroup of the PLC plan a presentation to educators elsewhere (at another school for instance), explaining differences among various kinds of accountability tests and the impact of those differences on teachers and students. The subgroup could give their presentation to the remaining PLC members as "practice."

2. *Explaining to the World*. In a manner similar to the above add-on activity, a subgroup of the PLC could plan such a presentation for a group of parents. As before, the subgroup could practice giving their presentation to the other PLC members, who would pretend to be parents and other laypeople who are not conversant with the sorts of assessment issues to be addressed.

Transformative Assessment was written by W. James Popham. This 150-page, 6" x 9" book (Stock #100018; ISBN-13: 978-1-4166-0667-3) is available from ASCD for $17.95 (ASCD member) or $22.95 (nonmember). Copyright © 2008 by ASCD. To order a copy, call ASCD at 1-800-933-2723 (in Virginia 1-703-578-9600) and press 2 for the Service Center. Or buy the book from ASCD's Online Store.