

Providing Guidance and Support for Teachers

The most creative and well-informed teacher may struggle and give up within an environment that does not support teaching that helps students develop into critically thinking, self-directed learners.

Students who are expected to take responsibility for their own learning in one class and are allowed to passively follow directions in another, are not likely to embrace self-direction. On the other hand, a school-wide program focusing on the use of formative assessment is likely to leave most teachers by the wayside. In Black's project in south England, his team began with a few math and science teachers and, over time, added English teachers. Even at that slow pace, however, teachers experienced challenges with new ways of looking at teaching and learning.

The designers and researchers of the KMOFAP project offer the following suggestions for improving student learning through consistent and continual use of formative assessments.

1. An individual or small group of teachers can take on the responsibility of trying out the methods and then, if they are successful, encourage others to follow their example.
2. An entire school can take on formative assessment as a school-wide initiative and support can be provided on a large scale to help all teachers adopt effective methods.
3. The best option, according to the researchers, would probably be to start out with a "limited experiments designed to inform and to lead to growth over several years" (2003, p. 100).

Providing teachers with a quick and easy type of formative assessment, such as asking students to respond with green, amber, or red traffic light icons to indicate good, partial, or little understanding of a concept, can give them a glimpse of what is possible with formative assessment. As teachers realize the value of the information they collect with simple, easy-to-use assessments, and see how their students' learning benefits from them, they become much more willing to try out other techniques.

Several professional development strategies, such as lesson study, action research, and teacher study groups, can provide teachers with the opportunities to take the first steps that will lead them into classrooms where student learning is at the center of teaching, and where on-going and embedded assessment gives students whatever they need to learn.

The switch from a teacher-centered classroom where students passively absorb information and show what they know on end-of-unit tests to one where students engage in meaningful activities that require critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving will not happen quickly or easily. Those who plan and implement professional development with the goal of creating student-centered classrooms need to keep in mind that "everyone learns best when there are ongoing opportunities to develop questions, investigate, reflect, apply and share knowledge in real-life contexts" (Bernard-Powers, et al., 2000, p. 4).