



**Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders – Leadership Council**

# Thought Leadership Forum Brief: Formative Assessment and Agency as Drivers of Instructional Transformation

September 2018

## Overview

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In May and June 2018, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd hosted two online Thought Leadership Forums for state education agency officials who are members of the Leadership Council of the Network of State Turnaround and Improvement Leaders. The monthly forums are intended to build the capacity of SEAs and regional comprehensive centers to support rapid school turnaround.

Forums are developed in pairs, with each pair focused on a key issue related to supporting school turnaround. The first of the two forums features a presentation by a recognized expert on that issue; the second forum, convened the following month, profiles work related to the topic, providing an on-the-ground example of the issue in action.

This brief summarizes the information presented in the May and June 2018 forums,<sup>1</sup> which examined how a structured approach to professional learning focused on collaborative feedback and self-reflection can transform instruction and learning for both teachers and students. The May presentation by Kevin Perks, Director of School and District Services at WestEd, introduced the drivers for and underlying research of instructional transformation. The following month, Suzi Mast and Tracy Fazio from the Arizona Department of Education and Superintendent Steve Holmes and Chief Academic Officer Pam Betten from Arizona's Sunnyside School District described how, through collaborative partnerships, a state and a district engaged in a systemic approach to instructional transformation, using formative assessment and student agency as core drivers.

## Instructional Transformation

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One of the Center on School Turnaround's *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement*<sup>2</sup> is Instructional Transformation, defined as a collective effort to improve classroom instruction

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<sup>1</sup> This brief draws directly from the forums, reflecting the knowledge, views, and experiences of the presenters; unless specifically indicated, the references in this summary are those that were included in the presentations.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from the Center on School Turnaround at <https://www.centeronschoolturnaround.org>.

Table 1. Sampling of Hattie’s research on the instructional factors that have the greatest impact on student learning/outcomes

Factor	Effect Size
Lesson Study	0.90
Formative Evaluation of Teaching	0.90
Discussion of Learning	0.82
Providing Feedback	0.80

across entire schools and districts by setting high expectations and providing the support necessary for those involved to meet them. This domain focuses on three key practices: diagnosing and responding to student needs; providing rigorous evidence-based instruction; and removing barriers and providing opportunities for teachers and students.

### Looking to Research

Research led by John Hattie (“Hattie & his high impact strategies,” n.d.) provides insights into the *how* of transforming instruction. Hattie reviewed and synthesized hundreds of studies to identify which instructional factors have the greatest impact on student learning/outcomes. His meta-analytical research looks at effect size, which is a measure of the strength of a relationship between an outcome (e.g., achievement) and a factor that influences that outcome (e.g., homework). A factor with an effect size below 0.4 is considered to have a low effect on student achievement; a factor with an effect size between 0.4 and 0.6 is considered to have a moderate effect; and a factor with an effect size above 0.6 is considered to have a high effect.

Hattie’s visible learning research suggests three key drivers for instructional transformation related to teacher learning:

- ◆ Routinely making teacher practice and teacher learning visible;
- ◆ Fostering feedback-oriented discussions;
- ◆ Conducting collective conversations focused on improving teaching practice.

Studies on effective professional development highlight the importance of collaborative and collegial learning environments that help develop communities of practice able to promote school change beyond individual classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). The professional learning activities with high effect sizes noted in table 1 (i.e., lesson study, formative evaluation of teaching, discussion of learning, and feedback) are all best accomplished in collaborative and collegial learning environments that make teacher practice and teacher learning visible.

While the power of collaboration is clear, only 31 percent of teachers report that they have sufficient time to collaborate with other teachers (The RAND Corporation, 2018). Even if teachers have time for collaboration, they may not be using it for the type of collaborative inquiry and discussion supported by research. Kevin Perks made the point that when we see the power and potential of collaborative time for peer dialogue and feedback, it is important for teachers to have the opportunity for the types of conversations necessary to improve practice.

### Research into Action: Professional Learning through Collaboration

VITAL (Visibly Improve Teaching and Learning) is a service offered by WestEd to build teachers’ capacity to engage in effective collaboration focused on teacher and student learning. The service includes a set of tools and processes designed to reflect what we know about professional learning that transforms practice. It establishes a professional teaching/learning cycle

in four phases in which teachers 1) prepare to engage in inquiry; 2) engage in a teaching-and-learning cycle; 3) study the impact on student and teacher learning; and 4) take action to share findings and results. In phase 2, the teaching-and-learning cycle, individual teachers plan a lesson and seek feedback on the lesson from their peers; teach their own lesson and, also, observe others' lessons (e.g., through video); analyze the results of their lesson by examining student work and other artifacts; and, in a collaborative setting with their peers, offer feedback on the lessons.

In VITAL these four phases in the teaching/learning cycle are supported by a set of structures and tools designed to guide teachers in making their practice *visible in collaborative settings* to collectively improve instruction by engaging in self-reflection, in structured and rigorous dialogue, and in formative peer feedback.

## Looking at Practice

### Arizona Department of Education and the Sunnyside School District — A Systemwide Approach to Scaling Instructional Transformation

At the June forum, leadership from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) and the Sunnyside School District in Tucson, Arizona, shared their experience with a systems-wide approach to scaling instructional transformation through formative assessment. Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by teachers and students *during* learning to elicit and use evidence to improve student understanding of disciplinary learning outcomes and support students in becoming self-directed learners (Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers [FAST] State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards [SCASS], 2018). Like the VITAL processes and other tools that guide teachers in making their practice visible in order to enhance their learning, formative assessment practices are designed to make *student* learning visible in collaborative settings, by providing opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection, structured and rigorous dialogue, and formative peer feedback — all with the intent of enhancing *student* learning. Those

features of adult professional learning with high effect sizes in Hattie's research are also evident in his research on the factors that have the greatest effect size on student learning: discussion, feedback, self-assessment, and reflection.

### The Arizona Department of Education

Seeking to both lead and support the state-wide implementation of formative assessment as a transformative approach to teaching and learning, to assessment, and to the development of student and teacher agency, ADE designed its implementation plan using Coburn's (2003) four dimensions of scale:

- ◆ **depth** — deepening understanding of formative assessment to generate a change in teachers' beliefs, norms of social interaction, and pedagogical principles;
- ◆ **spread** — not just in increasing numbers of teachers, schools, and districts engaged in formative assessment practice, but also the degree to which policies and systems reflect and promote changes in practice;
- ◆ **shifts in ownership** — from the SEA or LEA or an outside partner/provider to the teachers and students; and last,
- ◆ **sustainability** — taking steps to ensure that these changes become institutionalized.

Through partnerships with WestEd, University of California Los Angeles, Council of Chief State School Officers, and LEAs, ADE was able to develop a statewide implementation plan for formative assessment that was grounded in strong relationships among the partners. Given the good working relationships that ADE already had with LEAs around the state through its standards work, ADE staff knew which LEA-level systems were ready for formative assessment and had the capacity to make the necessary changes. This knowledge was key in identifying where to begin and in planning with the needs of participating LEAs in mind.

ADE presenters shared how they were able to strategically leverage professional development grant opportunities for participating LEAs to deepen their understanding of formative

assessment practice and engage leaders and teachers in this work. Local educators participated in blended professional learning about formative assessment. The content of this professional learning mirrored what they were learning about formative assessment for students: *making learning visible* by identifying learning goals and success criteria, eliciting and using evidence of learning to identify gaps, engaging in both peer feedback and self-reflection, and taking action. ADE presenters also shared how they focused on the need to build ADE's internal capacity by providing ongoing training across agency programs; for example, several staff members took the available online formative assessment course with the LEAs, contributing to and participating in a true community of learners.

ADE pointed to several accomplishments in its efforts to bring about systemic change in teaching and learning along all four dimensions of Coburn's scale: evidence of a shared definition and deepening understanding of formative assessment; changes in SEA and LEA policies and practices; increases in numbers of schools and LEAs involved; staff within the ADE and in partner LEAs who are committed to formative assessment; increases in professional learning opportunities over time; and increased support and resources in a statewide community of practice.

### Sunnyside School District

One of the strongest examples of a systemic approach to instructional transformation is the work of the Sunnyside School District, an initial partner in the state's efforts. Located in southern Arizona, with 21 schools and 985 teachers, Sunnyside has a student population of 16,005 — 83 percent of whom are Hispanic; 21 percent of whom are English language learners, and 84 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Sunnyside's Superintendent Steve Holmes spoke of the district's intent to establish a sustainable model for improving student performance — one that was grounded in equity and that would ensure student access to deeper learning and would support systemic change at scale. Recognizing that education organizations are

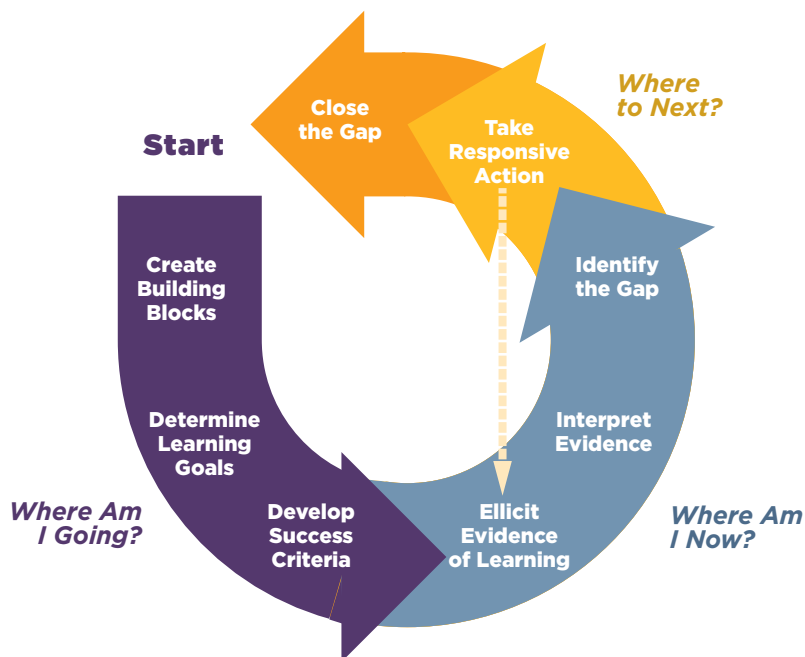
complex systems and seeking to bring coherence to the Sunnyside system, Holmes and his leadership team looked to Tony Bryk's work on implementation science, John Hattie's work on visible learning, and Margaret Heritage's work on formative assessment to help them build Sunnyside School District's Coherence Framework, a districtwide strategy for improvement with student agency at the center. A part of this coherent focus was establishment of a common understanding of student agency. As Holmes stated, student agency is "...not just *voice and choice*" but each student being an equal partner in the learning.

Pam Betten described how, with a framework, a theory of action, and a common vision of student agency, the district embarked on a systemic change effort with a single focus, the instructional core: "paying attention to what is happening in classrooms every day, making classroom practice everyone's work, and not looking for teachers to 'check for understanding' but, instead, to *elicit student thinking*." Under this approach, the formative assessment feedback loop (figure 1) became the central core of instructional practice.

To support, spread, and deepen this work districtwide, the district engaged in a number of strategies, including:

- ◆ Constant and consistent messaging around the definition of and expectations for formative assessment;
- ◆ Professional learning at monthly Principals Meetings;
- ◆ Principal cadre and coaches walk-throughs/instructional rounds with district team;
- ◆ Real-time feedback and coaching with leaders and teachers;
- ◆ Ongoing professional learning in WestEd-sponsored courses for teachers that provide time for peer feedback and self-reflection, beginning with 245 participants and adding a new cohort of 100+ each year; and
- ◆ Identification of "Lead Teachers" who will lead this work at their site.

Figure 1. Formative Assessment Feedback Loop



Source: Heritage & Gerzon, 2015.

### Evidence of Instructional Transformation after three years

Sunnyside School District leaders note evidence of instructional transformation and progress toward greater student agency. They report more intentional lesson design, with increased alignment to the standards and an increased level of rigor. They have also observed more meaningful teacher feedback to students, an increased level of student discourse and goal-setting, and students taking initiative by asking for and using success criteria and peer feedback. Looking ahead, Sunnyside leaders plan to continue the district's efforts to spread, scale, and share ownership of this work so that it becomes part of the district DNA, having learned that engaging deeply in this work impacts teacher beliefs and practice.

## Recommendations for SEAs

- ◆ Build on existing relationships with LEAs to identify systems ready for change.

- ◆ Identify and extend partnerships that can yield thought partners and provide content expertise.
- ◆ Develop an implementation plan that is flexible enough to meet the needs and local contexts of LEAs; intentionally and strategically plan for scale at the outset.
- ◆ Leverage discretionary grant opportunities to provide resources for LEA implementation.

## Recommendations for LEAs

- ◆ Emphasize that formative assessment is not “another” initiative.
- ◆ Provide constant and consistent messaging about the “why” of formative assessment, that is, its relationship to improved teaching and learning.
- ◆ Be willing to engage in deep learning at all levels and ensure opportunities for

collaboration, peer feedback, and self-reflection for district leaders, site leaders, teachers and students.

- ◆ Focus on building coherence within the district.

## Resources

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<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>

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