

Standards and Assessment Bulletin

A quarterly publication of the Vermont Department of Education

December 2007

Volume 1, Issue 1

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Field Notes

In-depth explorations of innovation in schools



Formative Assessment Project (FAP) at Mt. Anthony Union High School, Bennington

Mt. Anthony Union High School teacher, Steve Davis, begins the meeting with a series of questions: "How would you successfully lead a group of people to the top of a mountain? Would you point to the peak and turn around once, half-way up, to make sure everyone is following you? Or would you point to the peak, explain the route the group will take to the top, and then check back several times throughout the hike to ensure everyone is making progress?" The answer is obvious. An effective leader clearly explains the objective as well as the process for reaching it and continually assesses progress toward that goal.

This analogy aptly captures the concept of formative assessment.

Davis and his colleagues are participants in a new formative assessment program at Mt. Anthony—the Formative Assessment Project or FAP. Ten teachers from Mt. Anthony signed on to participate in FAP this school year, up from seven in 2006 when the program was in its pilot phase. FAP represents a collaboration of Vermont Department of Education, Educational Service Agencies (ESAs) across the state, Vermont schools and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) based in Princeton, New Jersey. In total, 21 schools and approximately 150 teachers are participating this school year. The goal of the program is to introduce the concept of formative assessment to educators and administrators across the state and support them as they implement the techniques in their classrooms. Formative assessment also represents one of the core principles of high quality local assessment so the Department hopes that the program increases schools' capacity to effectively integrate formative strategies into their comprehensive local assessment systems.

So what is formative assessment? Formative assessment redefines the structure and purpose of student assessment. Unlike summative assessments that are often given intermittently to measure what students have already learned (e.g. mid-terms or final exams), formative assessments are designed to give educators frequent, regular feedback about their students' learning. Formative assessments are smaller, more frequent assessments, embedded in instruction, that help clarify for teachers where students are in their learning and where they might need additional support. They are sometimes referred to as "quick concept checks." Teachers use the information provided by these quick checks to modify their instruction and ensure that all students are making progress. One participating teacher at Mt. Anthony says simply, "Formative assessment tells you where your students are and where your teaching should be going." In this way, the focus shifts from student *performance* to student *learning*, which, as teachers at Mt. Anthony point out, are not the same thing.

These smaller, more frequent assessments can take a variety of forms, many of which do not look or feel like the traditional tests to which students are accustomed. For example, teachers might end a class by posing a question related to that day's lesson and then ask students to submit an "exit ticket" with their response before leaving. Teachers may then review students' responses to determine how effectively they taught the lesson and whether more review or a different teaching strategy is needed before moving on to a new concept. Another formative assessment strategy is to have small groups of students develop a question related to that day's lesson and then present it to their classmates.

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Building Assessment Literacy

A focus on assessment design and interpretation of results



NECAP is a universally designed assessment...what does that mean?

You might have heard people describe Vermont's state assessment, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), as universally designed. But what exactly does that mean? The philosophy behind universal design is that assessments should be maximally accessible to students without altering the skills and knowledge being measured. Accessibility should be a starting point in the assessment design so that materials do not have to be retrofitted "in an attempt to accommodate students with learning differences" (Samuels, 2007). The concept of universal design does not necessarily mean a "one size fits all" approach but rather "acknowledges the need for alternatives to suit many different people's needs" (Rose and Meyer, 2000).

This philosophy can be applied to classroom assessments as well as large-scale measures. For example, instead of asking a student to write a book report in order to demonstrate her knowledge of the text, a teacher might allow the child to create a poster that captures the main ideas of the book (Samuels, 2007). If the goal is to accurately measure students' knowledge and understanding of the text, forcing them to demonstrate that via writing could place some students who are not strong writers at a disadvantage and pose barriers to their ability to really "show what they know."

Similarly, a universally designed state science assessment would not include vocabulary unrelated to the construct being measured that could inadvertently test students' knowledge of the English language rather than their science skills.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), an organization devoted to studying issues related to the assessment of students with disabilities, specifies other elements of universal design including accessible, non-biased test items, assessments amenable to accommodations, and simple, clear, and intuitive instructions and procedures (Thompson, Johnstone, and Thurlow, 2002). It is important to note that while universal design greatly reduces the need

for accommodations or alternate assessments, it does not preclude them entirely.

The concept of universal design actually emanated from a field far removed from education—building design and construction. Beginning in the 1960s, architects began paying closer attention to how the design of their structures either impeded or enabled access to individuals with physical disabilities. Things we are accustomed to today, such as cuts on sidewalks, improved lighting in buildings and advanced warnings of elevator approaches, are all improvements spawned by this movement (Hanna, 2005). These examples also illustrate how the concept of universal design provides for improvements for everyone, not only those with disabilities.

The education world is making progress in integrating universal design principles into classroom and assessment practice. The NECAP is one of the first state assessments in the country that fully embraces the principles of universal design. Thirty other states report considering the principles of universal design during test item development and review and about half, 27 (including Vermont), actually include universal design as part of their RFP for test development (Thompson, Johnstone, and Thurlow, 2002).

The concept of universal design does not necessarily mean a "one size fits all" approach but rather "acknowledges the need for alternatives to suit many different people's needs."

Samuels, C.A. (2007). 'Universal Design' Concept Pushed for Education. *Education Week*, 27(10), 1, 12.

<http://www.edweek.org/>

Thompson, S. J., Johnstone, C. J., and Thurlow, M. L. (2002) Universal design applied to large scale assessments (Synthesis Report 44). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

<http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/Synthesis44.html>

Additional Readings:

Hanna, E. I. (2005) Inclusive Design for Maximum Accessibility: A Practical Approach to Universal Design (PEM Research Report 05-04). Iowa City, IA: Pearson Educational Measurement http://www.pearsonsolutions.com/downloads/research/PracAppUnivDesign_rr0504.pdf

Rose, D. and Meyer, A. (2000) Universal design for learning, associate editor column. *Journal of Special Education Technology*. 15 (1). <http://jset.unlv.edu/15.1/asseds/rose.html>



CLEARING A PATH FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS
CLEARS THE PATH FOR EVERYONE!

From the Mailbag: Question of the Day



“Why do the School Quality Standards include a local assessment requirement?”

Results from statewide assessments such as the NECAP can help schools to track progress toward system-wide goals and can reveal trends or patterns across grades or groups of students. However, state assessments do not provide the type of ongoing diagnostic information that guides day-to-day teaching and learning. This is the role of local assessment. A Local Comprehensive Assessment System, in accord with the School Quality Standards 2120.2.2, must: enable decisions to be made about instruction, professional development, and educational resources and curriculum; be consistent with the Vermont Comprehensive Assessment System; align with the Framework and Grade Expectations; and employ a balance of classroom-based and school-level assessments. The Department has developed several guidance documents to assist schools and districts in the development of their local assessment systems...

- *Core Principles of High Quality Local Assessment Systems*: This resource is designed to give schools a starting place for developing their plan for a local comprehensive assessment system.
- *Self-Assessment Planning Guide for High-Quality Local Assessment Systems*: This guide serves as a tool to support schools in assessing their current progress along a continuum of implementation with respect to core principles guidance.

Both of these documents are available at: http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_curriculum/local_assessment_resources.html

For more information on local assessment, please contact Dave White, 802-828-0154 or dave.white@state.vt.us

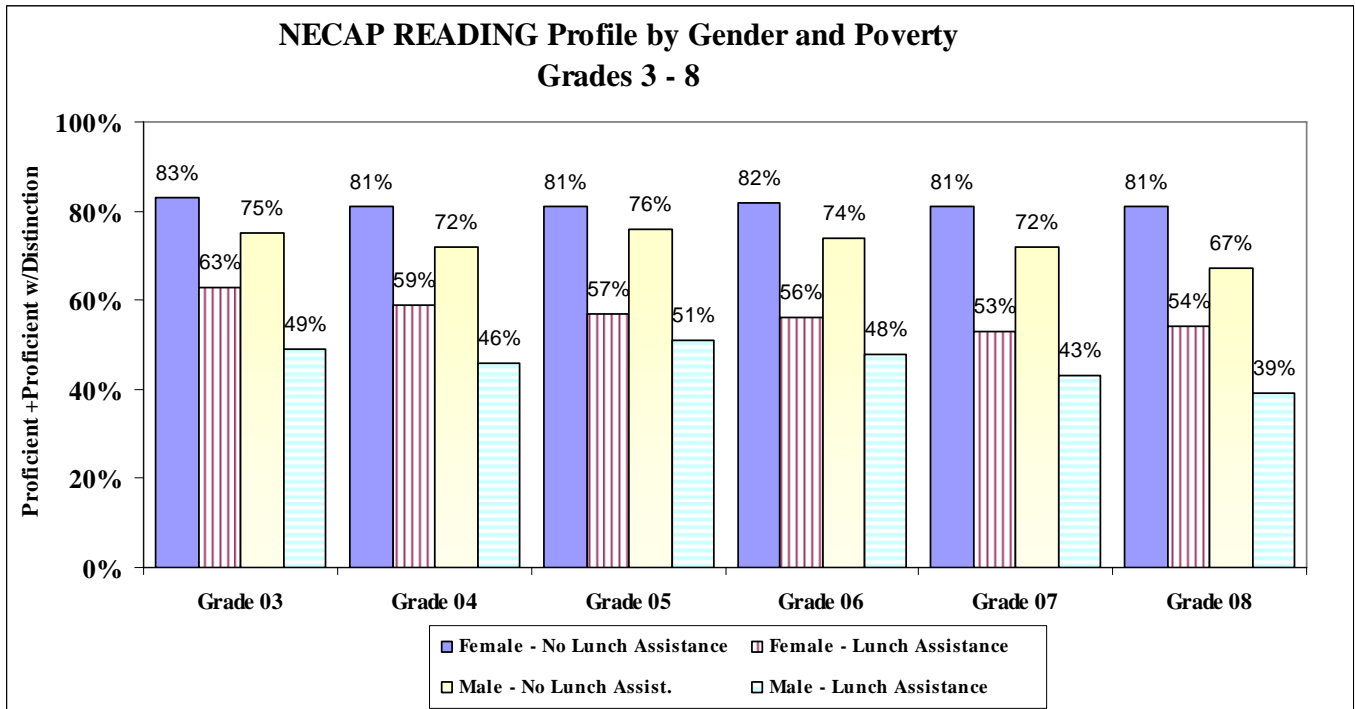
Have a question for the S&A team that you would like to see answered in this section?

Please contact Susan Hayes at 802-828-5892 or susan.hayes@state.vt.us

Data Grab: Statistic of the Day



Does the combination of gender and poverty have a greater impact on Vermont student



Across all grade levels, female students who are not eligible for lunch assistance (a measure of poverty) score highest whereas eligible males score the lowest. In only one grade level, grade 5, did more than 50 percent of eligible male students score at the proficient level or above. In addition, eligible male students experienced the largest decline from grade 3 to grade 8. The gap between ineligible female students and eligible male students is larger in grades 7 and 8 than in the early grades and is greatest at grade 8 where the difference in proficiency is 42 percentage points. It is interesting to note that gender gaps are evident within eligible and ineligible groups.

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The class then responds to each question in a public way, perhaps via a white board, so that teachers have a sense of the group's understanding. Students' ability to develop good questions is also indicative of their grasp of the material.

A common characteristic of these two formative assessment techniques is that they provide teachers with feedback about where students are in their learning so that instruction can be modified accordingly. Participating teachers at Mt. Anthony report that such instructional feedback is invaluable. Says one, "If you're not constantly assessing where kids are, how are you going to really help them?" Teachers also report that these types of assessments engage and interest their students in a way traditional tests typically do not. See diagram below for more information about the role of student feedback in the learning and teaching process.

Participating teachers in FAP schools receive intensive, continuous professional development in formative assessment during the summer and throughout the year. At the heart of this professional development are teacher learning communities or TLCs. TLCs give teachers time, once a month, to come together and discuss what formative assessment strategies and techniques they are trying and how they are working. Dave Larsen, a teacher for 33 years and a former chair of the Vermont State Board of Education, believes that the TLC model of professional development is one of the great strengths of the program. As he explained, "Sustainability at the local level (via the TLCs) was a primary component of the original program design and for that reason, I believe FAP has the potential to be around for awhile." Training more formative assessment leaders within schools is essential to the program's lasting power.

Another strength of the program, in Larsen's opinion, is the potential formative assessment has to transform educators' views of the utility of assessment data. While schools may use summative data (e.g. results from statewide assessments) to develop action plans or identify priority areas, it is sometimes challenging to translate large-scale assessment results into concrete steps teachers can take in their classrooms to improve student learning. Formative assessment, on the other hand, provides real-time data educators can use on a daily basis to improve their instruction and ultimately help students learn. In the words of one participating teacher, formative assessment "focuses instruction on learning and de-emphasizes the role of assessment as a form of ranking, judgment or gate-keeping." Another adds, "Formative assessment is more about student progress and mastery than grades alone."

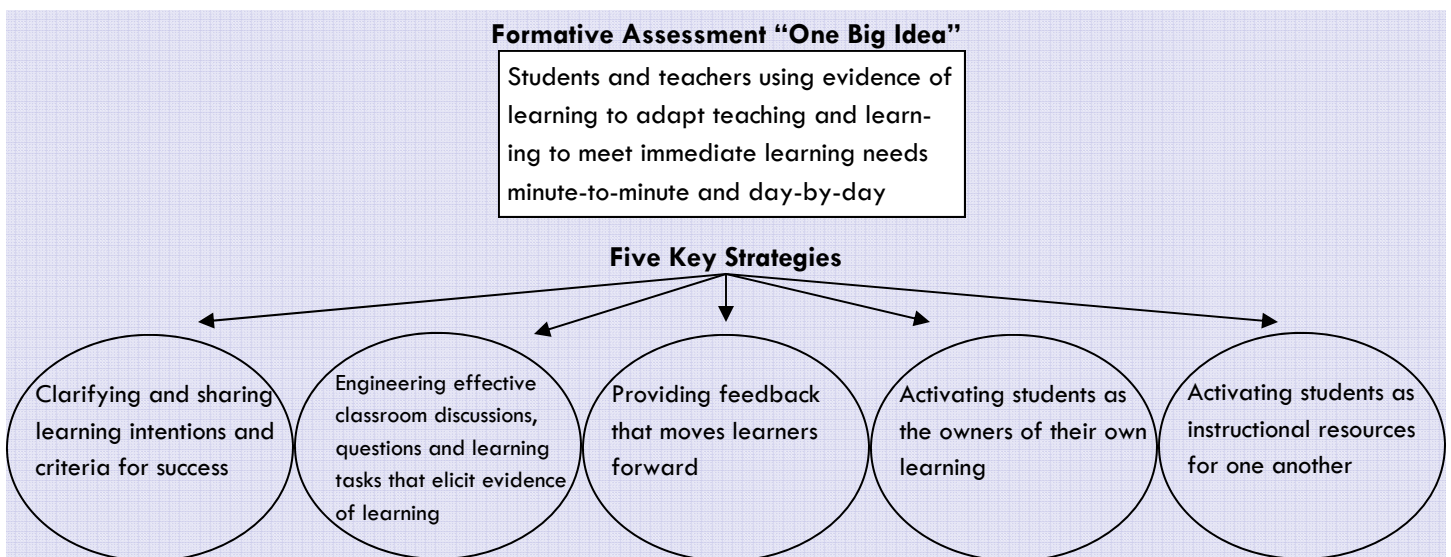
For more information on FAP, please contact:
Ken Remsen, 802-828-5142 or ken.remsen@state.vt.us

To learn more about formative assessment professional development opportunities in your area, please contact your local ESA (contact information is available on the Department website):

<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/prodev/resources.html#organizations>

Although teachers at Mt. Anthony report that the program is largely benefiting them and their students, some admit that being asked to reflect so intently on their own practice can be difficult. As one explained, "To really implement it (FAP) effectively, a teacher must be willing to critique what they've done in the past and change some habits." Larsen adds, "When you walk into a program that asks you to change something about your practice, you have to ask yourself, 'am I ready and willing to change?'" In addition, teachers at Mt. Anthony admit that devising effective formative assessment strategies and techniques takes more time "up front" but believe that it leads to more efficient and effective teaching over the long term.

On the whole, Mt. Anthony teachers seem pleased with the program and excited to be given the opportunity to collaborate in such a meaningful way with their colleagues. As one TLC participant commented, "The value of using formative assessment is two-fold. It makes good teaching even better and, ultimately, it is all about improving student learning."



Odds and Ends...

A few things we thought you would appreciate knowing



Department Website

For more information about assessment, please visit:

http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_assessment.html

For more information about curriculum and grade expectations, please visit:

http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_curriculum.html

Info Bullets

Each month, the S&A team emails “Info Bullets” to curriculum coordinators around the state that include information related to professional development opportunities, workshops, conferences, grant opportunities, research, etc. If you would like to receive this monthly service, please contact Dave White at 802-828-0154 or dave.white@state.vt.us

Bulletin Feedback

If you have any suggestions for ways to improve the S&A Bulletin or ideas for future features, please contact Susan Hayes at 802-828-5892 or susan.hayes@state.vt.us. We would also appreciate any articles or writings you would like to contribute to future issues.

Quote of the Day:

The highest result of education is tolerance.

– Helen Keller

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