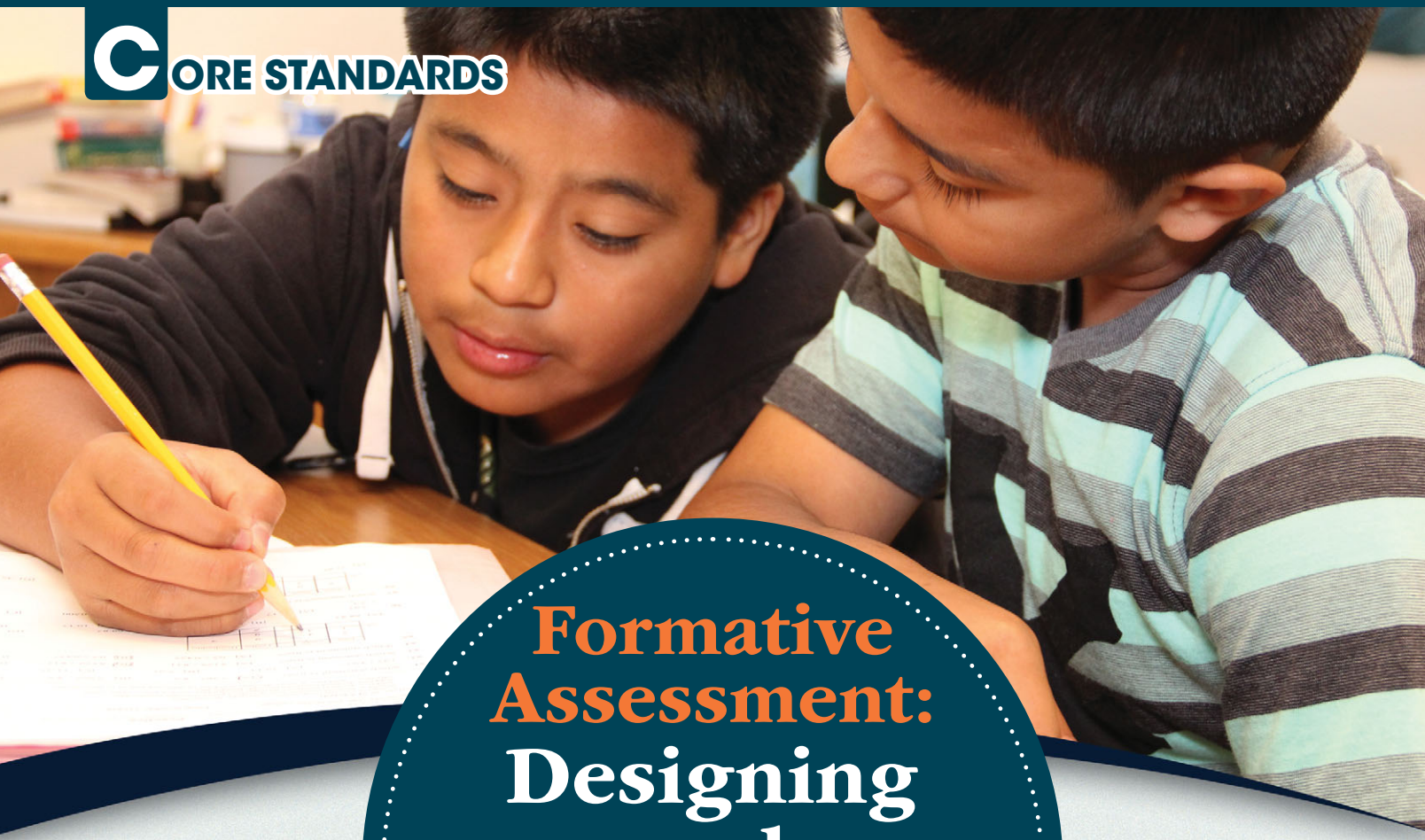

Formative Assessment: Designing and Implementing a Viable System

by Douglas Fisher & Nancy Frey

There sure is a lot of talk about assessment these days. Our profession is atwitter with discussions about student performance as well as international comparisons reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). For those of us working in locales focused on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), we are debating the opportunities and challenges presented by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). For those not working in areas touched by the CCSS, from Singapore to Texas, dialogue continues about the appropriateness of the current measures used to assess students' understanding. Hardly a day goes by without some tidbit of information about summative assessments.

But summative assessments are not the problem. The problem is that too much talk about summative assessments crowds out more useful conversations that teachers can and should be having about formative assessments. Formative assessments—assessments that inform instruction—are too often missing from the discussion. It's time to change that. It's time to invest in conversations about student performance and what we can do to improve understanding. It's time to develop and implement a formative assessment system. Yes, a *system*. We're not suggesting that teachers develop or purchase a formative assessment tool, but rather that they implement an intentional system for collecting and analyzing evidence of learning, one that signals what needs to happen next.

Aiming for the Learning Target

At the risk of stating the obvious, a formative assessment system begins with a learning target—that is, a clear statement about what students should know and be able to do in a given lesson. Without a clear purpose, teachers run the risk of collecting and analyzing meaningless data. A clear purpose allows for the identification of appropriate tools for checking for understanding. For example, a learning target that includes the expectation that students "cite textual evidence in their written arguments" suggests that teachers will need to collect students' work and analyze it for the inclusion of quotes and references. A learning target that indicates students will "retell key details of a nonfiction text" suggests that the teacher will need a data collection tool, such as a checklist, that lists the necessary elements of a quality oral retelling.

Searching for Understanding

Once the purpose for learning is clear, the teacher has to identify an appropriate way to check for understanding. There are a variety of options that teachers can use, including oral language, questioning, written language, projects and performances, and quizzes. As noted previously, the appropriate tool to use when students are expected to cite textual evidence is a writing sample, whereas the appropriate tool for the students engaged in retelling is a checklist. Importantly, the purpose and assessment tool must match if teachers are able to use the information to guide their instruction.

When the teacher has analyzed the data collected, actions can be taken to improve student understanding. Sometimes, this has to be done in the moment, as is often the case when students verbally respond to text-dependent questions. Other times, teachers can reflect on their students' work and develop a systematic plan for addressing students' errors and misconceptions, as is the case when administering a short quiz (not one for a grade) that allows for item analysis and re-teaching.

Errors vs. Mistakes

One way to save time in implementing a formative assessment system is to recognize the difference between an error and a mistake. When pointed out, students know what to do next when they've made a mistake. That's not to say that mistakes are unimportant, but rather that they don't require much additional instruction. On the other hand, students are not sure how to respond when confronted with an error. Errors require additional instruction.

We have found that it's easier to address the errors and misconceptions when we keep track of them. In the past, we handed back students' work and then our data was gone. We could only re-teach the errors that we remembered. Instead, we suggest that teachers list the errors that they see in students' work and then place students' initials next to the error.

For example, a first grade teacher may be on the lookout for errors as she reads her students' writing. She can construct a checklist based on the aspects of writing that she had taught and can leave some space for the surprise errors that she did not expect. Her list may include:

- Capital letters in the middle of a word.
- Misspellings of grade level high-frequency words.
- Misspellings of grade level spelling patterns (cvc, cvc silent e, consonant blend ch, th, sh, wh).
- Improper use of pronouns.
- Lack of topic sentence.

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Just from this short list, you can see what this teacher expects of her students and what the purpose for learning had been over several weeks. By listing students' initials next to the error, she is able to keep track of which students needed additional instruction from her. If she notes that the majority of her students had errors in pronouns, she knows that she would have to engage the whole class in additional learning. If only three students had misspellings of high-frequency words, she can plan to meet with them to review their papers with them. She knows that she would have to determine what additional instruction these three students would need to facilitate their automaticity with these words.

The list of needs and actions could go on, but suffice it to say that this teacher would be able to address the specific learning needs of her students because she has a clear purpose for their learning, she has systematic ways for collecting and analyzing their work, and she maintains effective records that allowed her to guide her students to increased success.

To our thinking, *this* is what is missing from the conversations about assessment. We should all be spending more of our time engaged in formative assessment systems that impact student learning. If the learning targets are aligned with the standards and the data collection includes the various ways students are expected to demonstrate understanding, the summative assessments will take care of themselves.

How to Address the Specific Learning Needs of Your Students

- Have a clear purpose for their learning.
- Have systematic ways for collecting and analyzing their work.
- Maintain effective records that allow you to guide your students to increased success.

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