



Leading by learning

When principals immerse themselves in learning about formative assessments and how students learn, they become better instructional leaders for teachers.

**By Susan M. Brookhart and
Connie M. Moss**

A lot has changed in the principalship since the principal was the head teacher in a school. Current principals are building administrators and that is likely to continue. But, to lead learning, the principal must become the leading learner and must focus attention on what students are actually doing when they're in class.

Formative assessments provide a way for principals to know more about what's occurring in each classroom. That knowledge then opens the door for the principal to identify areas in which teachers are already successful and areas in which they may need more assistance. Armed with that information, principals are able to have deeper and richer conversations with teachers about their practice.

By formative assessment, we mean an active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the students to continuously and systematically gather evidence of learning with the express goal of improving student

SUSAN M. BROOKHART (susanbrookhart@bresnan.net) is a senior research associate, and **CONNIE M. MOSS** is director of the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pa.



achievement. So, while the immediate focus of our work is formative assessment, ultimately the goal is the advancement of learning. This is the ground from which our understanding of a new role for principals grew.

During a recent professional development project, we watched principals learn more about both formative assessments and how they could change teaching and learning and their own relationships with teachers.

This work took place in a rural western Pennsylvania district that employs 486 teachers in five secondary schools and seven elementary and primary schools. Beginning in 2005-06, we started pilot professional development on formative assessment with six Title I teachers. The project grew, eventually including all induction year teachers. Still, the teacher-by-teacher approach lacked districtwide unity of purpose. Building administrators felt they needed to be part of the process. Therefore, in the last three years, our professional development focus has shifted from teachers to administrators — with some surprising results.

Principals' work in formative assessment

During the 2009-10 school year, administrators met monthly for professional development and then led professional development for teachers. They focused on two elements of the formative assessment process — shared learning targets and effective feedback. The principals showed videos at faculty meetings, required teachers to complete self-study packets, and engaged teachers in individual and group conversations regarding each element. Principals completed classroom walk-throughs using forms that focused on the key concepts in the videos. The monthly administrator meetings had two focuses: sharpening principals' skills at classroom observation and providing feedback to teachers, and examining classroom artifacts that administrators selected to show that practices of sharing learning targets and providing feedback were improving in their buildings.

In 2010-11 and 2011-12, administrators again met for monthly professional development. The content of the meetings included new information and reflection on things principals tried or observed in their buildings. Principals continued to make classroom observation and faculty development in formative assessment key building initiatives.

What they learned

At the beginning of the project, many of the principals said teachers were already doing formative assessment. They assured us that teachers had student-friendly learning targets and shared them

with students. They learned that they were mistaken. When they looked in classrooms using the new perspectives on formative assessment that they were learning together, principals realized not all teachers had learning targets. In fact, some didn't have learning objectives clearly in mind for their own instruction planning. "What caught me off guard about this whole thing is that I have high flyers that I thought were doing this already," said a junior high school principal. "But, when I did my observations, that wasn't the case."

Another important realization for the principals was that they learned more about both formative assessment and what students were learning when they observed what students were actually doing in class. Previously, they watched what the teacher was doing or they watched for discipline problems. Principals reported that when they changed their focus from watching the teacher teach to watching the students learn, they got more information about teaching and learning — and realized what they had been missing before.

Principals also learned how to give even effective teachers specific feedback and suggestions. At first, the administrators were only telling their exemplary teachers to be models for others. Principals learned to be more specific in their feedback and to give all teachers actionable information. Teachers are expected to provide students with specific feedback, and the principals realized the same recommendation applied to their feedback to teachers. Giving teachers more specific feedback improved how teachers used formative assessments and also improved collegial conversations with teachers.

As they participated, the principals grew in their understanding of formative assessment, but they also grew in their understanding of what learning looks like in classrooms. To lead formative assessment in their buildings, principals needed to view themselves as the leading learner and to learn about formative assessment themselves. They needed to look for and analyze what students were actually doing and learning in class. To know what to look for and analyze in classrooms, principals needed to understand formative assessment at a deep level themselves. These are the directions in which the principalship will change in the 21st century.

Be the leading learner

The principals who saw themselves as learners were best able to lead a shift toward a culture of learning in the school. Conversely, principals who did not see themselves as learners, but as supervisors, led buildings where an evaluative culture still prevailed.

One elementary principal sent regular emails to staff about what he observed in the building, so



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teachers could learn from each other. In one email, he wrote: “It has been an exciting, gratifying week to observe not only how quickly you have assimilated the ‘learning target’ talking points into your daily lessons . . . but also how promptly students have connected with the learning target notion.” He gave examples of specific things he observed and specific comments he heard teachers make, taking to heart the lessons on the effectiveness of specific feedback for learning at all levels, including for teachers. This learning culture seeps down to students as well. This same principal described walking down the hall one day. “You know how the kids tug on your shirt and tell you stuff?” One little girl tugged on his shirt and said, “Mr. D, we met all our learning targets today!” He shook his head and said, “I’ve been in education 30 years, and I’ve never heard a student say anything like that.”

A high school principal had an aha moment in a high school physics class. Sometimes, adults have a hard time taking the perspective of a learner since they already have learned many of the concepts and skills they observe in classrooms. In this class, the principal didn’t already know the material; he understood why having the teacher repeat that momentum was the learning target for the day was helpful: “The one question I want you to keep in mind is, ‘Was momentum conserved?’ ” the teacher repeatedly asked. The principal realized how that repetition kept him focused on the concept students were supposed to learn, and thus he came to understand the value of ensuring that students know what they’re supposed to be learning.

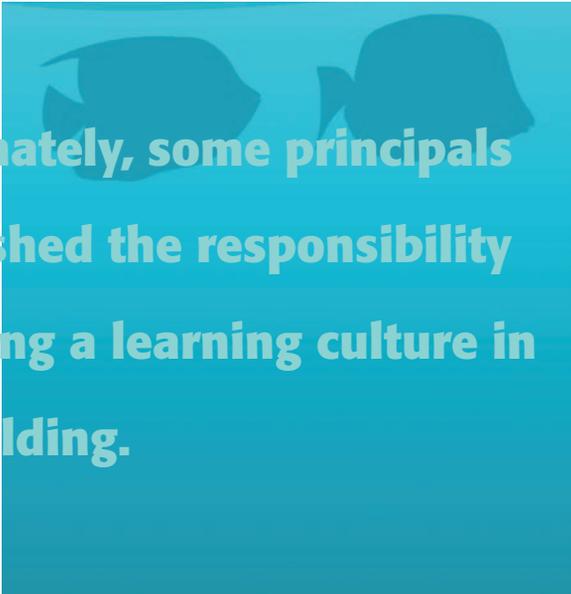
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Unfortunately, of course, we also worked with principals who did not see themselves as learners. They saw learning as the teacher's job. They tried to pass off formative assessment materials and resources to teachers. ("Can we give this to them as a handout?") Some of these principals said teachers were obstacles to advancing formative assessment in their schools because teachers didn't want to change. In effect, these principals relinquished the responsibility of building a learning culture in their building.

Look at what the students are actually doing

Principals who looked at what students were actually doing got a better picture of the learning that was going on in classrooms than principals who observed student behavior, which they sometimes characterized as "seeing if students were on task." And they certainly got a better picture of the learning by looking at what students were doing than by looking at what teachers were doing.



Unfortunately, some principals relinquished the responsibility of building a learning culture in their building.

Looking at what the students were doing caused one principal to change his thoughts about a teacher he had previously called "such a great teacher" because he had an engaging presence. However, when he looked at what students were actually doing in that classroom, he said, "The kids never did anything except listen to the teacher and occasionally shake their heads when he asked, 'Does anybody have a question?'"

A high school principal reported being shocked at observing a science teacher whom he had previously thought was an excellent teacher because she kept students engaged and students really loved her class. He was happy to pass by the classroom door over a two-week period, always seeing groups of students busily engaged at computers. There was a low buzz in

the classroom as students talked earnestly with each other in their groups. Students were preparing class reports on a biome their group chose and creating PowerPoint slides for their presentation. When the principal stopped in to observe, however, he looked at what students were actually doing. Mostly, students were learning how to use PowerPoint and create various effects in the slides. This learning did not match the curriculum or state standards in science, and that work certainly didn't justify two weeks of time. Before he learned to focus on students in formative walk-throughs, the principal would have been enthusiastic about all the student work and considered the teacher's instruction brilliant.

There were many times, however, when looking at what students were doing led to happier conclusions and specific feedback to the teacher on how she supported learning in her classroom. For example, an elementary principal looked at what students were doing in a 2nd-grade reading lesson on cause and effect. The teacher modeled cause-and-effect reasoning with a chapter book the students were reading. Then the teacher gave the students something to look for: "You will know you can do cause and effect well because you will be able to tell *why* something happened." And then the principal observed every student using the criterion, asking why and telling why, in the lesson activities. The lesson was differentiated to scaffold different learners, but, in each tier, students were engaged with the idea of cause and effect, and all students were checking to see if they could tell why.

Looking at what students are actually doing also highlighted the kind of thinking students were learning to do. For example, one high school principal observed a learning support teacher circulating around a classroom as students were doing problems about polygons. Some students had put out a stop sign (a marker on their desk requesting teacher help). The principal listened to the teacher ask, "Tell me what you were thinking. That's a small error; now, tell me what you were thinking." Then he was able to listen to student responses. In so doing, he could see that students had to solve polygon problems and also explain their reasoning.

Understand formative assessment

To know what to look for in classrooms, principals must understand formative assessment and what learning looks like at a deep level. Until principals can do that and until they develop specific descriptive language to name exactly what they see, they won't be able to recognize and understand formative assessment practices and their results — student learning — when they occur in the classroom.

For example, principals need to know the im-

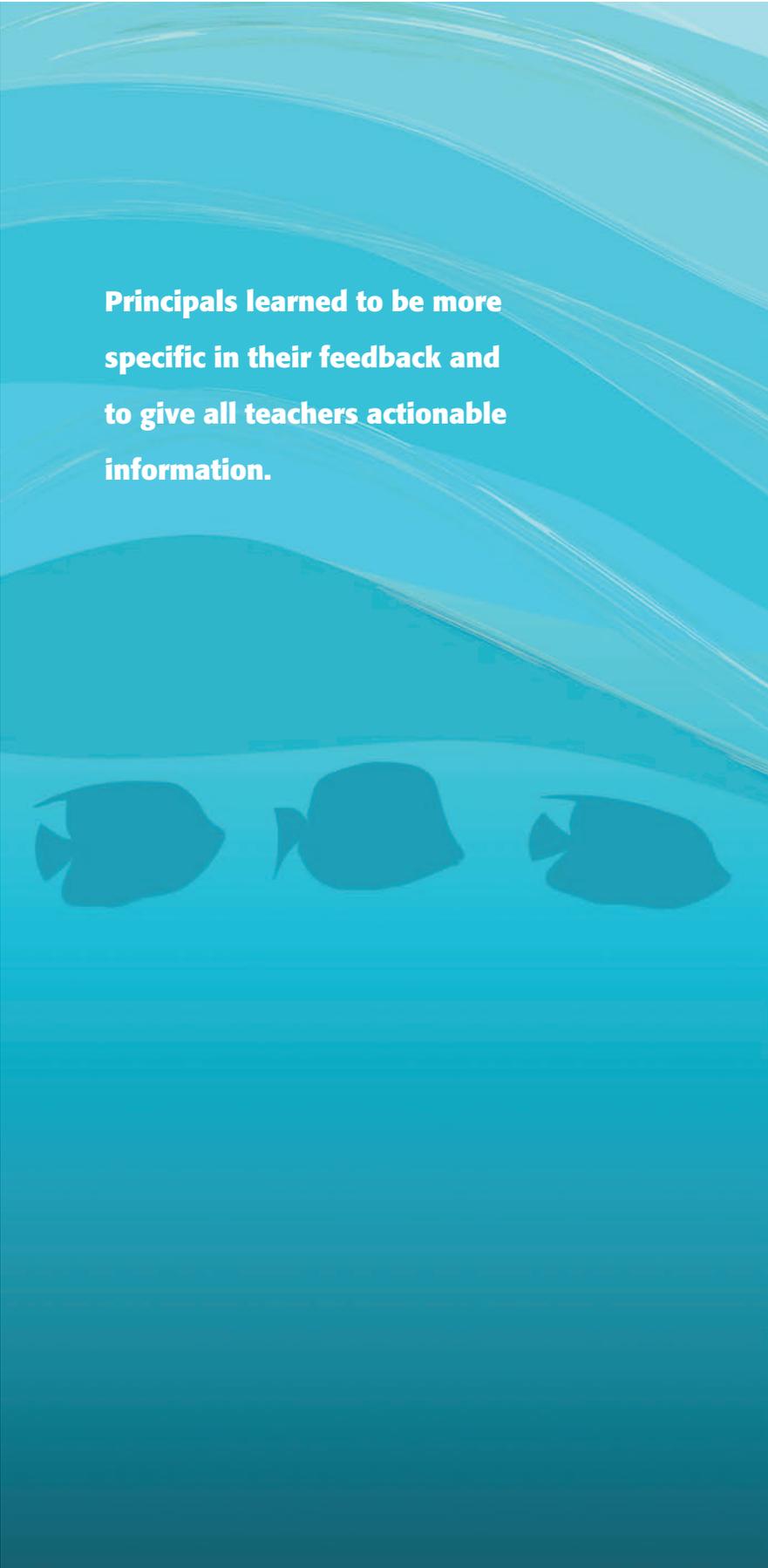
portance of ensuring that students understand their learning target, assess how close they are to the target, and then plan strategies for their own improvement. This is often summed up as: Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap? One elementary principal who had begun to internalize how important this sequence is for supporting student learning observed a 5th-grade reading lesson on main idea and supporting details. He could see that the teacher queried only a few selected students, called on a few volunteers, affirmed right answers, and moved on. He realized there was no evidence of what the students learned. He also had specific points to raise with the teacher in his feedback to her that, if addressed, would give her class more learning traction.

Conclusion

As we watched principals learn about learning, we watched them develop new knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Watching this happen right before our eyes was a great privilege. While our project centered on formative assessment, we realized that we were also watching the future unfold — a future in which principals' main responsibility has to do with learning. When principals lead learning in their buildings, the school culture transforms. Schools move from having an evaluative culture (“What-ja-get?” and “How good are you?”) to having a learning culture. (“What are you trying to learn?” “Where are you now?” “What will you do next?”)

All three of the new proficiencies require a combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Being the leading learner requires principals to have humility, to value learning, to understand how to learn, and to develop the skill of finding learning opportunities in their schools. Looking at what students are actually doing requires principals to value the actions of children and to respect them as learners, and to learn how to find evidence of learning. Understanding formative assessment requires principals to honor the learning process and value its base — as opposed to just its outcomes on standardized accountability tests — and learn the difference between student engagement in learning and other aspects of student behavior.

Expectations for the principal's job are changing. Most principals acknowledge that the focus has shifted from discipline, athletics, and administration to a focus on learning. In our work with principals on formative assessment, we discovered what that looks like as it happens. It starts with the principal seeing himself or herself as a learner, focuses on what students are actually doing, and emphasizes formative assessment as a powerful engine to drive the learning at both levels. The principals who move in this direction will be the ones moving forward. **◀**



Principals learned to be more specific in their feedback and to give all teachers actionable information.

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