Focus on FAME

What strategies do schools use to effectively integrate FAME into other state, district, or school initiatives?

Educators face many challenges in how to best meet student needs in an ever-changing society. It is critical for administrators and teachers to be aware of and use programs designed to support professional growth that positively impact teacher instruction and improve student achievement.

Many initiatives, at the local, state, and national levels, have a stated purpose of providing assistance to educators and students. Decisions must be made as to which initiatives support the school or district goals and, in most cases, which initiatives are compatible and support each other. In addition, when schools adopt multiple initiatives, they need to determine how these initiatives can work together to enhance teaching and learning.

Strategies for improving student achievement

In his article "Two Theories of School Improvement—Which Works Better?" (Education Week, May 2018), Marc Tucker, the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, describes two

competing theories of school improvement. Tucker names the first theory the *Successful Programs Strategy (SPS)*, and he argues that the logic behind the theory rests on findings of the USDOE *What Works Clearing House*. Tucker terms the second theory the *Successful System Strategy (SSS)*, which centers on strategies developed by American businesses several decades ago in order to regain supremacy in the increasingly competitive global economy.

The two programs rely on drastically different levers of change. Those who promote the SPS hope

that some new and innovative program can be mapped onto the existing grammar (policies, course requirements, classroom arrangements) of schooling. Tucker is critical of this program adoption approach, writing:

"You cannot build an effective system just by piling up effective programs. It does not matter how effective any reading program is if your teachers are poorly educated, poorly trained and poorly led."

In contrast, the SSS, borrowed from globally-competitive industry's "industrial benchmarking," does

not rely on the adoption of new programs. Rather, the SSS requires a complete system overhaul that begins with better, more talented and prepared teachers who enjoy several perks, including a lighter teaching load and greater compensation. The lighter teaching load frees up teachers to dedicate time to better planning and to invest in professional learning. Better compensation improves teacher recruitment (initial talent) and development (as teachers are more committed to the occupation over time).

Tucker argues that it is just this kind of system that many of the top-scoring countries employ. Their teachers learn to teach in a clinical setting and are immersed in professional communities that persist even after they become full-time teachers. In this community, teachers plan together, devise strategies for struggling students, and develop ways to incorporate ideas about best practices emerging from recent research.

FAME as one of multiple school initiatives

While Tucker's sentiment may be sympathetic, those educators actually working in schools may find these ideas unrealistic. Systematic overhaul of education is often wished for, but rarely realized (Sarason, 1982). Even the most optimistic reformer who envisions a day when teachers have extensive time to collaborate, receive competitive salaries, and merit high occupational prestige must ask and answer the question of what

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> – **Marc Tucker, President, National Center on Education and the Economy**

schools are supposed to do in the meantime. For better or worse, most schools are pursuing the *Successful Programs Strategy*. This is undoubtedly true for most schools in Michigan.

At most schools, FAME is one of many initiatives teachers and administrators are implementing. In other words, FAME competes with or complements a wide variety of other program initiatives designed to improve student performance. Initiatives begin to pile up, and local administrators and teachers must make sense of these programs and integrate them. When we asked principals at schools with active FAME teams about the reform initiatives at their schools, all principals listed multiple reforms currently underway. These data are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of School Improvement Initiatives Reported by FAME Principals

	Percent of Principals
FAME only	0%
Two initiatives	10%
Three initiatives	15%
Four initiatives	25%
Five or more initiatives	50%

Despite these less-than-optimal conditions, schools can likely benefit from multiple initiatives. However, they need to undertake a decision-making process concerning initiative adoption and then cultivate professional communities through which teachers will make sense of and adapt initiatives for maximum impact on instructional practices.

Decision-making and cultivation of professional communities

One of the main responsibilities of educational administrators is to make decisions concerning selection of and participation in school initiatives. To the outsider, each decision might seem simple; however, there are a number of factors that must be considered. In addition to reporting that they had multiple initiatives in their schools, participating FAME administrators expressed belief that they had considerable influence on which initiatives their schools adopted.

Thus, how principals decide to adopt initiatives is critically important.

Consider assumptions about teaching and best practice

First, principals should consider the assumptions about teaching and instructional best practices made by each potential initiative. FAME principals cite the alignment of FAME with John Hattie's *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2008) and Robert Marzano's various programs (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), which make instructional suggestions that closely align with the formative assessment process.

Our early research sheds some light on how this works in practice. FAME administrators from three Michigan school districts (Hesperia, Corunna, and Okemos) all agree with the need to "follow the research." They point, for example, to the many studies available showing the positive impact of providing proven professional learning for teachers (e.g., Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). These principals, as a result, choose only initiatives that provide or are supported by proven professional learning for teachers.

Consider culture

Experience shows that it is also important to consider the culture of the school or district. Any new initiative needs to "fit" with existing mission, history, and improvement goals. One main complaint about pursuing multiple initiatives is they appear like different "flavors of the month." Administrators emphasized it is important to determine how a new initiative supports and fits with the existing initiatives.

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Research shows that many initiatives, no matter the intent, do not succeed as well as advertised. Failures usually fall into three categories.

1. The trap of having too many initiatives. Since so many programs purport to have a positive impact, there is temptation to select and to use too many of them.

2. Lack of support. Worthwhile initiatives take time and commitment. In a world clamoring for instant change, some results take more time to emerge; yet initial lack of instant change may lead to abandoning initiatives too quickly.

3. Loss of direction or momentum. In many instances, there is a great deal of enthusiasm to start a program, but if the focus is not maintained, it may die a slow death.

Consider cost

Another factor FAME administrators consider is money. Educational initiatives can be expensive in terms of resources and time. They need to fit the budget of the school or district, both for start-up of the program and for continued support in the time that follows.

Cultivate professional communities

Finally, FAME administrators ask themselves how opportunities will be afforded to teachers to help them learn about the new instructional practices that will be expected of them after adopting a new initiative. Ideally, this learning would be situated in teacher teams in which teachers engage in deeply analytic discussions about current practices in light of new expectations, support each other in experimentation, provide one another feedback, and extend support during momentary setbacks or moments of frustration.

Why FAME?

In conversations with administrators who chose to include FAME among their initiatives, they referred to all the factors mentioned above as having guided their choice. They also liked the compatibility of FAME with other initiatives and FAME's benefits, both direct and indirect.

FAME's focus is improved teacher instruction by incorporating the formative assessment process in the classroom. Improved instruction leads to improved student performance. This supports and complements other initiatives that

also include the same goals of improved instruction and student performance. Under the FAME model, educators are part of a professional learning community (FAME Learning Team) facilitated by a Coach. They actually learn together and share their classroom experiences. This structure has a positive impact on instruction and helps to develop leadership. These are important characteristics that schools can incorporate with other school initiatives.

Learn more

Please visit the FAME website at **FAMEMichigan.org** to view the case studies and videos for more information on strategies schools use to effectively work on FAME and other state, district, or school initiatives.

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What is Formative Assessment?

Formative assessment is a process that occurs during teaching and learning to improve student outcomes. The following definition of formative assessment from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is used by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in the Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) professional learning program.

"Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become more self-directed learners."

(CCSSO SCASS FAST, 2017)

What is FAME?

Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) is a professional learning program in which teams of educators work on learning teams supported by coaches working collaboratively to learn about, implement, and reflect on the formative assessment process.
The program involves educators in a multi-year commitment to promote significant change in professional practice, supported by internal and external resources. Since 2006, thousands of educators have participated in the FAME program to guide student learning and teachers' instructional practices across the state.

Resources to Learn More About Formative Assessment and FAME

- Heritage, M. (2007). Formative Assessment: What Do Teachers Need to Know and Do? Kappan, http://tinyurl.com/Heritage-Kappan

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- Swaffield, S. (2016). Multilevel Leadership for Assessment for Learning, and the Potential of Critical Friendship. Leadership in Diverse Learning Contexts.