The Importance of testing:
Assessment is a huge topic that encompasses everything from statewide accountability tests to district benchmark or interim tests to everyday classroom tests. In order to grapple with what seems to be an overuse of testing, educators and parents should frame their views of testing as assessment and that assessment is information. **The more information we have about students, the clearer the picture we have about achievement or where gaps may occur**.

Defining Formative and Summative Assessments The terms "formative" and "summative" do not have to be difficult, yet the definitions have become confusing in the past few years. This is especially true for formative assessment. In a balanced assessment system, both summative and formative assessments are an integral part of information gathering. If we depend too much on one or the other, the reality of student achievement in the classroom becomes unclear.

Summative Assessments are given periodically to determine at a particular point in time what students know and do not know. Summative assessments are often associated with standardized tests such as state assessments, but they are also used at and are an important part of district and classroom programs. Summative assessment at the district and classroom level is an accountability measure that is generally used as part of the grading process. The list is long, but here are some examples of summative assessments:

- State assessments
- District benchmark or interim assessments
- End-of-unit or chapter tests
- End-of-term or semester exams
- Scores that are used for accountability of schools (AYP) and students (report card grades).

The key is to think of summative assessment as a means to gauge, at a particular point in time, student learning relative to content standards. Although the information gleaned from this type of assessment is important, it can only help in evaluating certain aspects of the learning process. **Because they are spread out and occur after instruction every few weeks, months, or once a year, summative assessments are tools to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs, school improvement goals, alignment of curriculum, or student placement in specific programs.** Summative assessments happen too far down the learning path to provide information at the classroom level and to make instructional adjustments and interventions during the learning process. It takes formative assessment to accomplish this.

Formative Assessment is part of the instructional process. When incorporated into classroom practice, it provides the information needed to adjust teaching and learning while they are happening. In this sense, formative assessment informs both teachers and students about student understanding at a point when timely adjustments can be made. These adjustments help to ensure students achieve targeted standards-based learning goals within a set time frame. Formative assessment helps teachers determine next steps during the learning process as the instruction approaches the summative assessment of student learning. A good analogy for this is the road test that is required to receive a driver's license. What if, before getting your driver's license, you received a grade every time you sat behind the wheel to practice driving? What if your final grade for the driving test was the average of all of the grades you received while practicing? Because of the initial low grades you received during the process of learning to drive, your final grade would not accurately reflect your ability to drive a car. In the beginning of

learning to drive, how confident or motivated to learn would you feel? Would any of the grades you received provide you with guidance on what you needed to do next to improve your driving skills? Your final driving test, or summative assessment, would be the accountability measure that establishes whether or not you have the driving skills necessary for a driver's license—not a reflection of all the driving practice that leads to it. The same holds true for classroom instruction, learning, and assessment.

There are many classroom instructional strategies that are a part of good teaching. When teachers use sound instructional practice for the purpose of gathering information on student learning, they are applying this information in a formative way. In this sense, formative assessment is the art of teaching and clearly cannot be separated from instruction. It is what good teachers do. The distinction lies in what teachers actually do with the information they gather. How is it being used to inform instruction? How is it being shared with and engaging students? It's not teachers just collecting information/data on student learning; it's what they do with the information they collect.

Some of the instructional strategies that Blackfoot School District uses formatively include the following:

Criteria and goal setting with students engages them in instruction and the learning process by creating clear expectations. In order to be successful, students need to understand and know the learning target/goal and the criteria for reaching it. Establishing and defining quality work together, asking students to participate in establishing norm behaviors for classroom culture, and determining what should be included in criteria for success are all examples of this strategy. Using student work, classroom tests, or exemplars of what is expected helps students understand where they are, where they need to be, and an effective process for getting there.

Observations go beyond walking around the room to see if students are on task or need clarification. Observations assist teachers in gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional planning. This evidence can be recorded and used as feedback for students about their learning or as anecdotal data shared with them during conferences.

Questioning strategies should be embedded in lesson/unit planning. Asking better questions allows an opportunity for deeper thinking and provides teachers with significant insight into the degree and depth of understanding. Questions of this nature engage students in classroom dialogue that both uncovers and expands learning. An "exit slip" at the end of a class period to determine students' understanding of the day's lesson or quick checks during instruction such as "thumbs up/down" or "red/green" (stop/go) cards are also examples of questioning strategies that elicit immediate information about student learning. Helping students ask better questions is another aspect of this formative assessment strategy.

Self and peer assessment helps to create a learning community within a classroom. Students who can reflect while engaged in metacognitive thinking are involved in their learning. When students have been involved in criteria and goal setting, self-evaluation is a logical step in the learning process. With peer evaluation, students see each other as resources for understanding and checking for quality work against previously established criteria.

Student record keeping helps students better understand their own learning as evidenced by their classroom work. This process of students keeping ongoing records of their work not only engages

students, it also helps them, beyond a "grade," to see where they started and the progress they are making toward the learning goal.

All of these strategies are integral to the formative assessment process, and they have been suggested by models of effective middle school instruction.

Balancing Assessment: As we gather information/data about student learning, several categories may be included. In order to better understand student learning, we need to consider information about the products (paper or otherwise) students create and tests they take, observational notes, and reflections on the communication that occurs between teacher and student or among students. When a comprehensive assessment program at the classroom level balances formative and summative student learning/achievement information, a clear picture emerges of where a student is relative to learning targets and standards. Students should be able to articulate this shared information about their own learning. When this happens, student-led conferences, a formative assessment strategy, are valid.

The more we know about individual students as they engage in the learning process, the better we can adjust instruction to ensure that all students continue to achieve by moving forward in their learning.

Blackfoot School District #55 Standardized Testing Opt-out Form

Dear _____ (School name)   Date_____

I am writing on behalf of _____, my son/daughter,

to opt him/her out of the District Standardized Test_____ (test

name). He/she is neither permitted to take the exam during mandated testing days nor during

designated make-up sessions. I would like to additionally request that the school please make

accommodations for meaningful alternative activities or assignments that will continue to

promote his/her academic and intellectual growth. I ask that you please honor this decision.

I do apologize in advance for the inconvenience or scrutiny that this decision may cause the

administration, the school, and staff.

Sincerely,

_____