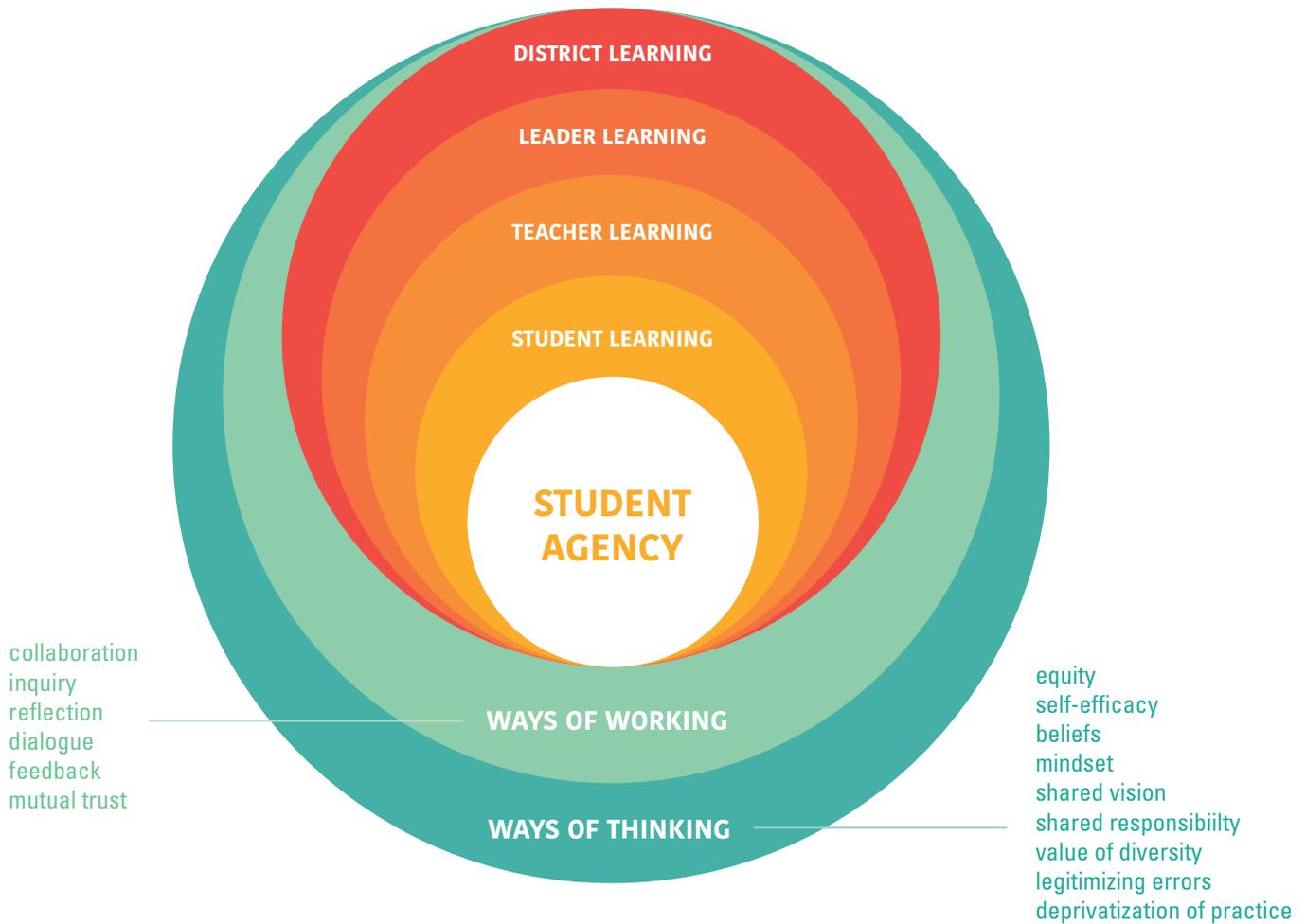


# A CULTURE OF LEARNING TO SUPPORT STUDENT AGENCY: GUIDING ADULT LEARNING OF FORMATIVE ASSESMENT



This visual captures findings from formative assessment researcher Menucha Birenbaum (2012), who has found strong evidence that shows a relationship between how adults learn, and how students learn, in schools and districts that have developed expertise in formative assessment, and moved towards practices that promote greater student agency.

As you notice and begin to make sense of this graphic, take a look at the two lower circles, focused on ways of working and ways of thinking. You may notice that the characteristics of ways of working and ways of thinking, including dialogue, feedback, and shared responsibility, are closely aligned with the expectations for a collaborative classroom culture that is a hallmark of formative assessment practice. In schools that are successful in increasing student agency, these same collaborative practices are used throughout the system, for adult learners as well as students. Creating learner agency for adults involves working together in new ways that engage in ongoing cycles of inquiry and reflection, and promote self-efficacy in learning.

You may also notice that this graphic depicts a “through-line”, indicating that district learning, school leader learning, teacher learning and student learning are aligned. Moving towards student agency involves each level of the system to model inquiry, reflection and learning in ways that supports those who are in the next level of the system. Just as teachers learn to model and scaffold what it means to provide effective peer feedback, so too do school leaders need to model what it means, for instance, to celebrate risk, or encourage diversity of opinion.

Three central concepts from the Birenbaum research are highlighted below, with guiding questions to explore each.

## Hallmarks of a Learning Culture

A learning culture is a particular philosophical atmosphere in which leader learning, teacher learning, and student learning flourish. In this atmosphere, uncertainty, struggle, and confusion are valued, and they are understood to be generative stimuli for creativity and learning. When a gap between intended and attained outcomes occurs, the response is not disappointment but eagerness to understand what caused the gap.

One of the hallmarks of this culture is that adults and children work within and cultivate a growth mindset: a belief that one’s basic qualities—such as personality, intellectual abilities, etc.—are malleable or incremental, not fixed, “carved in stone,” or innate. Holders of a growth mindset believe that their intellectual abilities can be developed through effort and training; they are oriented toward learning goals rather than performance goals, aiming to grow their abilities rather than demonstrate them. Consequently, they view failure as an opportunity to learn rather than as an indication of their lack of ability. At the school level, schools that embrace a growth mindset have teachers who view teaching as an opportunity for continual professional growth and believe that all their students can learn and develop their skills using proper scaffoldings. Likewise, principals who embrace a growth mindset believe organizational learning is collective. Reflective inquiry into practice is a top priority, and it is their mission to facilitate such learning so it becomes a habit within the school.



*ASK YOURSELF: How do you support a growth mindset with students?  
What specific approaches do you use to support a growth mindset among adults?*

## Fostering Learner Agency

Research has shown that the most effective professional development for in-service teachers is situated in their school context and builds on their knowledge and day-to-day classroom challenges. Participants in a school-based professional learning community (SBPLC) collaboratively develop an inquiry stance toward their own practice.

The school structure that supports high-level SBPLC is one in which hierarchy is flattened and leadership is decentralized, allowing every teacher to take an active leadership role, thus enhancing teachers’ self-efficacy and collective efficacy, and increasing motivation to invest efforts in improving their practice.

Leaders support teacher learning by structures and routines for evaluation, knowledge management, staff involvement, and professional development. Teacher agency is also supported by structured opportunities for peer feedback, self-reflection and individual goal-setting. Setting up time to meet, however, is not sufficient by itself. Teacher agency is increased when learning opportunities are structured to provide rich learning tasks that help to establish shared understanding of strategies that enhance student learning.



*ASK YOURSELF: At your school, what is one organizational or procedural change that would help to “flatten hierarchy”? What would have to be in place to ensure the kinds of learning opportunities and structures that foster adult learner agency?*

## The Relationship between Formative Assessment and Teacher Learning

The way students learn and the way adults learn are very similar, and in highly effective adult learning communities, we see the same elements that we see in Formative Assessment classrooms, including:

- a focus on student learning,
- shared school vision,
- reflective dialogues,
- collaboration,
- shared responsibility coupled with high expectations for the learning of all students in the school,
- professional self-efficacy,
- collective efficacy,
- supportive social climate,
- ‘deprivatizing’ of practice (collaborating, sharing practice, and planning with others),
- learning from errors, and
- common language.

In short, teachers grow their practice through an inquiry cycle that mirrors Formative Assessment and both processes occur through participation, agency, and assessment aimed at improvement.



*ASK YOURSELF: Choose one of the characteristics above. What might this characteristic look like as part of your formative assessment professional learning? How might you ensure that this practice is used routinely during adult learning?*