



Creating Common Assignments

The Impact of Teacher-
Designed Instructional Units

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LESSONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An Investment in High-Quality Instructional Units

In the summer of 2013, 45 English language arts (ELA), history, and science teachers met to co-design “common assignments”—units of study containing embedded formative assessments—to teach in their classrooms. Based on the experience during year 1 (2013–14), most participating teachers and administrators believe that Common Assignment Study (CAS) units can help them increase instructional rigor and enhance student learning, according to a recent evaluation by Research for Action (RFA). Researchers also found evidence that the CAS model of strong teacher collaboration focused on creating curricula and examining student work will expand and grow.

The units of study contain some common performance tasks for students, including a template approach called a Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) module. LDC modules foster college-ready literacy instruction across subject areas. They use a common framework but also are flexible enough to allow teachers to make their own decisions based on their students; local, state, or Common Core standards; and the specific texts and strategies they want to use.

This brief explores the RFA findings in more detail, discusses the future potential of CAS as implementation continues, and shares the first-hand experiences of teachers in the field.

“The cool thing about CAS is that we had such different tools and resources to contribute. By yourself there’s no way to bring such a powerful unit together.”

—Kaitlin Newlin, ELA teacher,
Bill Reed Middle School, Colorado

Background

In 2013, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, in partnership with Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) and The Fund for Transforming Education in Kentucky (The Fund), brought together 45 Colorado and Kentucky teachers for the collaborative task of developing the CAS units.

The meeting was part of the foundation’s \$3.5 million investment in the three-year CAS to learn what it takes for teachers working in different states and districts to successfully design, revise, and implement common units that meet their

respective state and district standards for college and career readiness. Other key questions the study aimed to answer: Can these co-designed units serve as evidence of students’ academic growth? Can they capture knowledge and skills not demonstrated on a typical test? And can they be used in conjunction with state educator effectiveness systems?

In addition to learning how these classroom-based measures compare with traditional assessments, the foundation also is supporting inquiry about how student performance on the CAS units compares within and across schools, districts, and states. Different patterns of performance among students can lead to conversations among teachers and administrators about instructional strategies and resources.

Now in its second year of implementation, CAS has reached more than 9,600 students, and the project has expanded from four to 12 districts across the two states. CEI and The Fund are managing the project in their states, providing technical assistance, and covering stipends and release time for teachers. The state partners and the foundation also are releasing completed units.

RFA, based in Philadelphia, is conducting research on implementation. The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE) at Stanford University provided content-specific technical assistance and facilitated the unit design process. Westat provided technical assistance and support, and the

Center for Assessment is beginning to analyze student work samples to answer some of the research questions posed previously, such as whether teachers could use the common assignments as evidence of their students’ growth in educator effectiveness systems.*

Improving Collaboration Skills

RFA’s research on the collaborative aspect of CAS highlights several lessons that can benefit additional schools and districts that begin doing common assignment work. The researchers gathered general feedback from teachers and administrators about their participation in the project and asked some specific questions about the teachers’ experiences teaching the spring units. Among the RFA findings:

- Co-designing the units has allowed the teachers to incorporate new instructional strategies into all the courses and subjects they teach.
- Teachers report that it has been challenging to find the best method for staying in touch after their in-person meetings. They used email, the CAS website, conference calls, and social media. Across all content areas and grade levels, teachers “perceived face-to-face collaboration as the most productive way to work together,” according to RFA.
- Both teachers and administrators report that participation in CAS has

*This document quotes a range of teachers and administrators directly involved in CAS. These quotations were not drawn from RFA’s research, which adheres to the confidentiality standards of rigorous, objective social science research.

strengthened teachers' collaborative skills, and the teachers say that they learned how to compromise to make the units stronger.

"There are several voices that need to be heard, and some voices are much stronger than others," says Melissa Henderson, a middle school ELA teacher who team-teaches with Rosalind Koop at Woodland Middle School in the Kenton County School

District in Kentucky. She adds that the process allowed the teachers to capitalize on their strengths.

"We all had to learn how to give something up," adds Jennifer McDermid, English department chair at Colorado's Thompson Valley High School. "If it didn't address the standards or the unit's focus, then it belonged somewhere else."

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Aligning Lessons to Standards Improves Teaching

The CAS teachers started with several different entry points to designing the units. Some led with specific state standards that the units would address, others began by identifying common topics that would blend well into the schedules for both states, and some started with a concept that they wanted to teach in a new way. Irrespective of the entry point, the teachers made sure the learning activities and texts they chose addressed all pertinent state standards, including the Common Core standards embedded into the LDC tasks. Teachers used a CAS template, adapted from the Understanding by Design template, to design each unit. Teachers said that having such a framework in place—plus abundant shared resources and tools—helped them teach stronger, more targeted lessons.

According to RFA, the vast majority of CAS teachers—**97 percent**—believed that the spring units **"aligned well with the Common Core standards."** **Ninety percent of teachers** also agreed that the spring units **"helped me find effective strategies for teaching my subject matter."**

"For those teachers who are fretting about teacher effectiveness... well, we've built CAS to address that," says Kaitlin Newlin, ELA teacher at Bill Reed Middle School in Colorado. "Everything they could be looking for is in this unit: curriculum aligned with the standards, pre- and post-assessments, et cetera."

Lisa Adams, a biology teacher at Thompson Valley High School in Colorado, praises the way the unit brought everything into focus. "In the past I'd lecture, set up labs, and then I'd realize at the end of the unit that the kids couldn't apply anything," she says. "But with CAS you're always coming back to that essential question that ties everything together."

At the same time, the teachers say that the units offered standards but not standardization. They still had flexibility to make their own choices to match the needs of their students. For example, Robin Reid, who teaches history at Lafayette High School in Kentucky, chose to use unabridged primary source texts, rather than excerpts, to make the unit rigorous enough for her Advanced Placement students. And Henderson and Koop spent time up front giving their students extra practice on specific components of the writing process, such as developing a thesis statement and organizing an introduction.

Units That Improve Student Learning— AT ALL LEVELS

Teachers report that their students are producing higher-quality work because of the CAS units.

According to the RFA study, **“the overwhelming majority of teachers believed that students were engaged in the CAS unit” and “CAS has positively influenced student learning.”**

Henderson and Koop saw a higher level of performance from their students than in previous years. “What we were doing was helping the students really grasp the skills and understand how to analyze a piece of text and how to use it,” Koop says.

Having an LDC module as the centerpiece of the unit, Reid says, has helped her improve her teaching of the writing process, particularly as it relates to writing about social studies. Brison Harvey, who also teaches at Lafayette, adds, “They

[the students] are forced to look into the primary source documents with an investigative eye.”

Adams, too, appreciates the LDC, saying that her students have a new understanding of the role writing plays in science. She’s seeing an improvement in the writing, even among lower-performing students. “They know how to apply what they’ve learned.”

Seeing her students’ excitement about a unit on biodiversity—in which they took on the role of scientists presenting their papers at a research conference—also convinced Adams to remain in the study after she was close to dropping out because of the extra workload.

“It was like, ‘Who are you and what have you done with my normal kids?’” she says, adding that the students even asked if they could go to the library so they could print their presentations in color.

In focus groups, **students reported that they enjoyed the hands-on aspects of the CAS units, which improved their understanding of the content. And according to RFA, “Ninety-two percent of teachers indicated that the spring units were flexible enough to meet the needs of all their students.”**

The CAS teachers developed the units with a wide range of students in mind. Different types of formative tasks, for instance, allow some students to move ahead quickly, while providing additional support for students who might need more background knowledge and practice on specific skills.

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—Rosalind Koop, ELA teacher, Woodland Middle School, Kentucky



Implications for Teaching

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN WORKS.

The CAS teams are demonstrating that teachers coming from very different perspectives and backgrounds can excel at collaboratively designing instructional units that meet the Common Core standards as well as the standards and guidelines of their own states and districts.

More than **90 percent** of the teachers said that **the spring units aligned with their school's curriculum.**

"You just need to focus on what the standards you've picked really say, and what it will take for you to get to these standards," says McDermid, echoing the thoughts of many CAS teachers.

TEACHER LEADERSHIP WORKS. Many teachers also have developed new leadership skills, and administrators report seeing teacher growth. By the summer of 2014, the teachers were largely facilitating the unit-planning sessions during the CAS meetings, while the technical assistance providers from SCALE continued to provide content expertise.

Teachers report that the work with CAS has changed their practice in other ways, too. Many are reworking other units they teach so that they mirror the CAS units by beginning with the standards and essential questions they want students to explore. Others have picked up new teaching strategies they can apply in their classrooms. Harvey, for example, says he will use the strategy for analyzing political cartoons throughout the curriculum, not just in the CAS units.

ENTHUSIASM IS SPREADING. Enthusiasm for the project also is spreading to other teachers in their schools and districts.



Most teachers and administrators interviewed believe that CAS will continue to expand, and almost three-quarters of teachers said that they have shared the CAS units with colleagues who are not part of the study, according to RFA.

"My advice to these teachers is to take what you're doing to the next level with CAS," says Jessica May, Newlin's teaching partner at Bill Reed. "And if they want to add something to the units, they can. There's plenty of flexibility in CAS for people to bring their own ideas."

APPLICATIONS ARE SPREADING. Some district leaders also report that they want to apply what their teachers have learned through CAS more broadly. "We have this vision that we want to create common assignments across the district—sort of as benchmarks," says Elizabeth Tronoski, a learning and innovation specialist for the Fayette County School District in Kentucky. And Tara Sides, the principal at Woodland Middle in Kentucky, says that the strategies Koop and Henderson are using to analyze student writing can be applied across the curriculum.

Recommendations for Improvement

RFA highlights several areas that could be strengthened as CAS implementation continues.

- Allow teachers the time to “unpack differences in state and district standards,” and discuss how to manage those differences. For example, when teachers from two states—one whose standards focus on students’ mastery of content and another whose standards focus on students’ development of skills—work together to create a common unit that teachers from both states can use in their classrooms, they need to spend time gaining a clear understanding of each state’s standards.
- Give teachers more time to collaborate while they are actually implementing the units, either virtually or at the school or district level. Teachers said that they wanted to continue working together as the unit was actually being taught. State, district, and school leaders can work to create these opportunities.
- Document and share the strategies that teachers are using to differentiate the units to meet their students’ needs. For example, some teachers gave their higher-achieving students longer texts to analyze or additional labs to complete. Collecting these different strategies and modifications can benefit those who teach the units in the future.
- Provide clear communication about the links between CAS and teacher effectiveness systems. Some teachers and administrators talked about how CAS student work could help teachers meet their teacher effectiveness goals. Teachers and administrators need to be involved in discussions about how CAS units and student work could be used as part of teacher evaluation, feedback, and support systems.
- Keep administrators involved in CAS so that they can provide instructional support, and involve leaders at the schools in “broadening and deepening” implementation. For example, administrators who have been involved since the beginning could provide support to those who are newer to the project.
- Continue to find leadership roles for teachers through CAS. Teacher leaders are a key part of sustaining and spreading the use of the CAS units among their colleagues.

Moving Forward

The CAS units are now available to teachers in multiple ways. They will be on the foundation’s [College-Ready Education website](#). In Colorado, they will be posted on the [CEI website](#) and available through the Colorado Department of Education. In Kentucky, they will be available on [The Fund’s website](#) as well as through the Kentucky Department of Education’s [Continuous Instructional Improvement Technology System](#).

During year 2 of the study, RFA continued to gather feedback on the implementation of the units, the collaborative process, and the participants’ perceptions of how CAS is influencing teacher practice and student learning. In addition, they examined the roles of district, school, and teacher leaders in CAS and how the work is scaling up at different sites. Researchers conducted an additional survey of teachers and administrators and visited districts in both states to learn more about the challenges and successes of the project. RFA’s report on the second year of CAS will be available in early fall 2015.

In a joint summer 2015 meeting, participants from Colorado and Kentucky will review their progress over the past year and provide guidance to new districts joining the study.

At the Center, researchers are beginning to analyze whether student work demonstrates that students learned what the units were designed to teach. The Center is also focusing on the potential of CAS units in non-tested grades and subjects to become part of states’ teacher effectiveness systems. Because high-quality assessments and multiple measures of student learning are built into the units, they are connected to the work teachers

do every day in the classroom. Therefore, they could replace the need for additional accountability assessments that are often disconnected from teachers’ practice. A brief from the Center explains how CAS fits into Colorado’s [Educator Evaluation and Support System](#) because it provides more than just pre- and post-test information on students’ learning. A second brief describes how CAS meets the objectives of the Kentucky [Professional Growth and Effectiveness System](#). According to the Center, these common assignments “offer considerable opportunities for providing evidence in support of both student learning outcomes and teaching practices.”