Executive Summary:
Using Common Assignments to Strengthen Teaching and Learning:
Research on the 1st Year of Implementation
Prepared by Research for Action for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
September 2014

The Common Assignment Initiative

The Common Assignment Study (CAS) has been designed to address the gap between educators' current instructional practice and the level of practice necessary to dramatically increase the number of students who master the knowledge and skills called for in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Conceptually, CAS builds on previous efforts to improve instruction through the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC).¹ LDC’s template-task approach to supporting key instructional shifts has demonstrated utility for teachers working to enhance literacy instruction across multiple content areas.

The CAS builds on the work of LDC by building literacy instruction into larger “content” units and by incorporating LDC modules into the units. In the CAS, teachers work across districts and states to collaboratively develop instructional units with embedded “common assignments” for use across multiple classrooms. To create units, teachers work in six subject-grade teams: middle school and high school English/Language Arts (ELA), science and history.

The CAS has two mutually reinforcing components:
1. Teachers in separate locations collaborate on unit development and implementation.
2. Teachers use common pieces of student work to have instructional conversations and calibrate their expectations for students.

These two components reinforce each other. Further, the Common Assignment Initiative gives schools and districts a means of strengthening teachers in three ways:
1. By providing professional learning opportunities, largely through teacher collaboration;
2. By using student work to provide teachers with information on their students’ academic needs and evidence of their academic performance; and,
3. By providing evidence of teachers’ impact on their students’ academic outcomes.

¹ See ldc.org for more information about the Literacy Design Collaborative.
Introduction

Initiated in the 2013-14 school year, the CAS is a three-year effort being led by the Colorado Education Initiative and The Fund for Transforming Education in Kentucky with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This executive summary presents key findings from Research for Action’s (RFA’s) report on the first year of CAS implementation.

Overview of Research

RFA’s CAS research focuses on providing formative feedback on unit design, unit implementation, teacher collaboration, and supports from partners. RFA is also investigating participant perceptions of enhanced teacher practice and improved student learning.

Data was collected through stakeholder interviews, teacher surveys, and observations of teacher collaboration and analyzed to assess the status of implementation in Year 1. Interview data were gathered in all four participating districts and surveys were administered to all participating teachers. Results were triangulated across data types.

Of the 45 teachers who began the CAS in summer 2013, 41 were still active in May 2014. Teacher participation was distributed across the two participating states (Kentucky and Colorado), four districts, middle and high school levels and the three content areas.

Figure 1. CAS Participant Demographics
Findings

Table 1 below summarizes major findings from RFA’s research on the first year of CAS. The first two findings focus on teachers’ perceptions of how this initial implementation of CAS was affecting their practice and student learning. The rest of the findings focus on Year 1 implementation, including conditions such as alignment and leadership which may support implementation.

Table 1. Key Year 1 Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>KEY FINDINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teachers reported that CAS helped them incorporate new instructional strategies and increase instructional rigor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teachers and students say CAS is enhancing student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teachers experimented with multiple approaches to collaboration (e.g., in-person, email, conference call, the CAS website), but found sustaining in-depth virtual collaboration across districts and states challenging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teachers, administrators and partners generally called spring unit implementation successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teachers reported success using the units with diverse student populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Scoring and uploading students’ work was less burdensome in the spring than in the fall, but challenges remained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Participants reported positively about CAS’s alignment with state standards, school curricula and district instructional goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Both school and district administrators offered support for teachers’ CAS participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The majority of administrators and teachers believed CAS would expand and grow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I. Influence on Teacher Practice

Teachers reported that CAS helped them incorporate new instructional strategies and increase instructional rigor.

- Almost all CAS teachers surveyed indicated that designing and teaching the second unit provided them with effective teaching strategies for both subject matter and literacy skills. Two-thirds of teachers reported that unit 2 helped them incorporate more formative assessment in their class and become more knowledgeable about students’ strengths and weaknesses.²

---

² N=39 for all survey data in this section on teacher practice.
Many teachers reported that CAS helped to make their instruction more rigorous. Almost three-quarters of teachers surveyed agreed that the spring unit raised their expectations for student work and 62% of teachers agreed that it helped them increase the rigor of their teaching. In interviews, some teachers explained that opportunities to exchange ideas with colleagues from other districts and states encouraged them to try new activities and approaches and helped to make lessons more challenging.
Teachers and administrators reported that participating in CAS was strengthening teachers’ leadership and collaborative skills. Principals and district administrators reported seeing teacher growth and thought that teachers’ CAS learning would benefit their schools as a whole.

2. Influence on Student Learning

**Teachers and students say CAS is enhancing student learning.**

- The overwhelming majority of teachers (92%, n=38) believed students were engaged in their CAS unit.
- Students enjoyed the interactive, hands-on components of the unit. During focus groups, students voiced that this method of teaching helped them better understand the content.
Teachers believe CAS has positively influenced student learning. Specifically, large majorities of teachers reported that the second unit helped students improve both their understanding of content (92%) and their writing (84%). Further, almost three-quarters (74%) of teachers agreed that their students produced high quality work for the spring unit.

3. Teacher Collaboration

In the first year, cross-district and cross-state collaboration focused on designing common units and assessments, problem-solving during unit implementation, review of student work, and revising units.

Teachers experimented with multiple approaches to collaboration (e.g., in-person, email, conference call, the CAS website), but found sustaining in-depth virtual collaboration across districts and states challenging.

- Teachers praised the experience of collaborating with colleagues across districts and states.
- Across content areas and grade levels, teachers perceived face-to-face collaboration as the most productive way to work together.
• Teachers used multiple modes to communicate with their CAS colleagues. Email was a primary form of communication for five of the six subject-grade teams. Almost all teachers (97%, n=35) reported that email was helpful in facilitating collaboration.
• Many teachers found it challenging to sustain in-depth virtual collaboration in the midst of all the immediate demands of their schools and classrooms. Lack of time and busy schedules were the biggest barriers to collaboration during implementation.
• Despite the challenges of long distance collaboration, more than three-quarters of teachers (n=39) indicated that collaboration with their team had helped them successfully teach the CAS unit (87%) and support student learning (80%).
• School level CAS partners generally collaborated more closely than did district CAS partners and were more likely to call the partnership helpful. Most teachers who did not have a CAS teaching partner at their school would have liked to have one.

4. Unit Implementation

Teachers, administrators and partners generally called spring unit implementation successful.

All CAS teachers taught one unit in both fall semester and spring. The biggest challenge of fall unit implementation was that units took longer to teach than expected, but almost all teachers wanted to modify and teach the fall unit again.
• Spring unit implementation was generally successful. In interviews, teachers, administrators, and partners reported that implementation got stronger between fall and spring.

Teachers reported success using the units with diverse student populations.

• Teachers reported success using the units with diverse students. Ninety-two percent of teachers (n=37) indicated that the second unit was flexible enough to fit the needs of all of their students. CAS teachers used units with advanced, regular, special education, and English language learner populations.

There are four advanced level classes and one general level class. However, I am running the unit exactly the same. There are a few more supports I put in for the general level students, so we do a lot more discussions....But as far as the texts, they're reading the same texts. – TEACHER

Scoring and uploading students’ work was less burdensome in the spring than in the fall, but challenges remained.

Examining student work is a major component of the CAS initiative. The data collection process included uploading student scores to a designated website and submitting student work samples. Data collection emerged as a difficult task during the first unit because of the time
demands of scoring and uploading student work and also because of confusion around the expectations for grading and sharing scores and student work with partner organizations.

- Adjustments to the spring unit processes reduced some of the demands related to student work. Adjustments included asking teachers to collect data for only two classes and reducing the number of common assessments in the units. Areas of improvement included:
  - Scoring: A majority of teachers (64%) reported that the overall process of scoring student work was smoother during implementation of the spring unit.
  - Uploading student work and providing student work samples: About half (49%) of teachers agreed that uploading student scores and providing work samples for the second unit took less time than it did for the first unit.
  - The time demands of responding to student work were a challenge for many teachers. Overall, about half of the teachers responding to the spring survey indicated that it was difficult to find time to give feedback on their students’ work from the second unit and this was especially true for science and social studies teachers.

5. Alignment

Participants reported positively about CAS’s alignment with state standards, school curricula and district instructional goals.

Figure 5. Unit Alignment

- Almost all teachers surveyed agreed that Unit 2 aligned well with the CCSS, their school’s curricula, and with their district’s instructional goals. Teachers’ conviction that CAS fits well with their curricula seems to have grown since the fall unit, when 64% (n= 39) of teachers indicated that Unit 1 was a good addition to their curricula.
• Some science and social studies teachers were concerned that the units took time away from required curriculum topics. However, most of those still affirmed that, despite the time pressure, Unit 2 fit well and was a good addition to their curricula.
• While some district administrators noted that CAS could help teachers meet new teacher effectiveness demands, no teachers mentioned this aspect of alignment.

6. Leadership and Support

Both school and district administrators offered support for teachers’ CAS participation.

• Most teachers were positive about school and district administrator support for CAS participation. Three quarters of teachers agreed that district (n=38) and school administrators (n=39) are supporting their CAS work and that these administrators encouraged their participation in CAS.
• Teachers indicated that district administrators were more involved than principals in some aspects of CAS. They were especially likely to perceive district administrators’ support as helpful. This may be because district administrators were the point people for CAS and, in many cases, were more directly involved than principals.

They’re [district administrators] always asking us what support you need, let us know. – TEACHER

7. CAS Sustainability

The majority of administrators and teachers believed CAS would expand and grow.

• Teachers reported that CAS has been worth the time and effort. Ninety percent (n=39) of teachers responding to the teacher survey agreed that their participation in CAS has been worth their time and effort.
• The majority of teachers, principals, district administrators, and other partners interviewed believe that CAS will expand and grow. Almost three-quarters (74%, n=38) of teachers indicated that they had shared the CAS units with non-CAS colleagues and that they look forward to teaching CAS units in the coming year. In interviews, many school and district administrators were enthusiastic about CAS and its role in improving teacher practice and student learning. Further, they wanted to expand it within their schools. Some indicated concerns that could inhibit expansion:
  o Inadequate funding.
  o The need for more common planning time.
  o Lack of time for in-person collaboration.
Areas for Improvement and Further Research

Year 1 research reveals areas in need of improvement within CAS. This section examines such areas related to collaboration, unit implementation, alignment, leadership, and sustainability. In some cases, leaders have already taken steps to make adjustments. In Year 2, partners can continue to monitor and address the challenges and opportunities outlined below. Researchers will continue to investigate them as well.

Collaboration

- **Ensure time to unpack differences in state and district standards.** The focus and implementation of CCSS-aligned standards can vary across states and districts. As the initiative grows, it will be important to engage teachers in sharing how cross-state teams have managed these differences and for partners and teacher leaders to think about how to connect units to standards as operationalized by multiple states.

- **Increase opportunities for implementation collaboration.** Many teachers want more opportunities and time to collaborate during unit implementation; this can occur virtually as well as in person at the school or district level.

Unit Implementation

- **Encourage and document strategies for unit differentiation.** Collect and share strategies teams have developed to make units work for learners at different levels.

- **Improve supports to assist teachers in meeting the demands of the research related to student work.** To ensure that teachers can deliver high quality information to researchers about student work, they need clear and consistent direction as to what is expected and how it needs to be delivered.
  - Clarify rubrics to maximize their utility during the scoring process.
  - Dedicate time for calibrating the scoring of student work so that stakeholders develop shared perceptions of quality work.
  - Continue to provide teachers options for uploading and submitting work that will reduce their time and effort on this task.

Alignment

**Communicate more clearly about links between CAS and teacher effectiveness.** Partners want CAS to provide authentic, meaningful data about teacher effectiveness, but this idea has not been clearly communicated. Engaging teachers and administrators in reflecting on how CAS units and related student work could become a valuable component of their teacher effectiveness systems could help build this aspect of the work.

Leadership

- **Continue engaging administrators in CAS.** Year 1 administrators could benefit from ongoing professional development about CAS. Such support could assist
administrators in offering more robust instructional support for CAS. In addition, Year 1 administrators would be well positioned to provide guidance to Year 2 administrators.

- **Support site-based leaders in planning for sustainability.** District and school administrators, as well as teacher leaders, could play important roles in broadening and deepening CAS implementation.

Sustainability

- **Continue to develop teacher leadership.** For CAS to grow and take root in participating districts, it will be important to create pathways for teacher leadership in CAS and to support districts in engaging teachers as leaders at the district level.
- **Clarify what needs to be common in CAS.** It is important for partners to address ongoing questions about the common elements of CAS.
- **Solidify and communicate the plan for CAS in Years Two and Three.** Partners should formulate a clear strategic plan and articulate it in a timely way to teachers and administrators. Further, partners should engage stakeholders in planning and/or providing feedback on plans.