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# Introduction

## THE NEED FOR A NEW EDITION

Even a timeless process needs to remain timely. Eight years have passed since *Common Formative Assessments: An Assessment Model to Help All Students Succeed* (2006) was first published, and thousands of K–12 educators across North America have successfully implemented the ideas and processes presented in that original volume. Established professional practices will continue to prove effective now and in the future so long as they remain relevant to the prevailing changes and educational demands of the time.

After many years presenting the CFA process to K–12 educators and leaders in districts all over the United States and Canada, I have seen the need for teams of teachers to revisit their initial CFA drafts in order to evaluate their assessment questions for quality. In doing so, they are able to then revise and improve those assessments. Because the inferences educators make about student learning can only be as good as the evidence they collect, the *source* of that evidence—the assessments themselves—must be of high quality.

Even if you have never attended an assessment design course or workshop, by following the new, step-by-step CFA 2.0 process you will be able to successfully create a quality assessment. Those who are already experienced in designing CFAs will find that this updated process will take your CFAs to an even higher level of effectiveness.

## INTRODUCTION TO COMMON FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS 2.0

Common formative assessments are aligned pre- and post-assessments *for* learning that are collaboratively designed by a grade- or course-level team of educators to assess student understanding of the particular learning intentions and success criteria currently in focus within a curricular unit of study.

CFAs afford grade- and course-level teacher teams a clear lens through which to see their instructional impact on student learning. The assessment questions directly match the levels of cognitive rigor within the unit learning intentions (derived from academic content standards or provincial learning outcomes). Accompanying success criteria describe explicitly what students are to demonstrate in their assessment responses to show they have achieved the learning intentions. Knowing what they are to learn and how their understanding will be evaluated, students are empowered to take a more active role in their own learning.

**Learning progressions** are the smaller, sequenced “building blocks” of instruction necessary for students to understand the larger unit learning intentions. Shorter formative assessments—*quick progress checks*—occur throughout the unit after learning progressions. These quick checks of student understanding provide immediate feedback that educators use to adjust instruction and that students use to self-regulate their learning strategies. Learning progressions and corresponding quick progress checks are new steps added to the original CFA process.

## KEY BENEFITS OF CFAS

- The CFA 2.0 process is not limited to assessment design only. Rather, it is a *system* of intentionally aligned components (standards, instruction, and assessments) that all work together to improve student learning.
- Grade- and course-level teams of educators collaborate to intentionally align their pre- and post-CFAs and write their assessment questions to match the same level of rigor as in the unit’s learning intentions (derived from state, provincial, or Common Core standards).
- CFAs include a blend of assessment formats: selected response, constructed response (short and extended), and Essential Questions requiring students’ Big Idea responses. This multiple-format assessment makes learning more visible because it affords students more than one way to “show all they know.”
- Teacher teams use the resulting student responses as diagnostic feedback to correctly interpret student understanding and differentiate instruction. Students use the same valuable feedback to monitor and adjust their individual learning strategies.
- Educators often write their CFA questions to reflect the formats of state, provincial, and national assessments so students have ongoing opportunities to demonstrate what they are learning in the ways they will be expected to respond on standardized achievement tests.

- CFA questions are evaluated for quality and revised as needed using established criteria. This ensures that the inferences educators make from the assessment results are accurate.
- Educators find great value in collaboratively scoring the CFAs, discussing the results, and planning ways to achieve improvements in student learning on the next common formative assessment they administer.
- Common *formative* assessments can do what large-scale *summative* assessments, by design, cannot—provide classroom educators with timely, credible evidence of their impact on student learning and achievement. Focusing energy and time on the analysis of small-scale, school-based assessments to improve instruction is sure to help educators meet the diverse learning needs of all students.

## WHAT'S NEW IN THE NEW EDITION?

The original CFA process remains essentially the same, although it has been enhanced to include important aspects absent from the original. Here is a preview of the key points of emphasis in the CFA 2.0 process, organized by category:

### Standards and Learning Outcomes

- Applies to all standards (state and Common Core), all learning outcomes (province specific), all grades, all content areas; educators need only insert the unit-specific learning intentions for their grade level or course into the structure provided.
- Targets the specific learning intentions and student success criteria for a multi-week unit of study that are derived from the **Priority Standards**, “unwrapped” concepts, skills, levels of cognitive rigor, **Big Ideas**, and **Essential Questions**.

### Intentional Alignment

- Shows how to match assessment questions to the predetermined levels of cognitive rigor, using the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy and Webb’s Depth of Knowledge matrices.
- Describes how to partner quick progress checks with learning progressions (the incremental building blocks of the larger unit learning intentions).

- Underscores the importance of teacher teams closely aligning their pre-assessments with their post-assessments for each unit of study.

### **Large-Scale External Assessments**

- Emphasizes the need for educators to know how their students will be assessed on standardized achievement tests and then to design their CFAs to reflect the formats, vocabulary, and rigor of those external exams. In this way, students will become familiar with how they will be expected to show what they have learned prior to taking those high-stakes tests.
- Provides links to online examples of questions from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments.

### **Diagnostic Use of Data**

- Allows for timely analysis of formative assessment data to accurately interpret student understanding and plan instructional “next steps” to meet student learning needs.
- Enables educators to continually modify and adjust instruction during the unit based on results from ongoing quick progress checks aligned to the post-CFA.
- Advocates the sharing of assessment results (pre-CFA, quick progress checks, and post-CFA) with students.

### **Success Criteria**

- Informs students at the beginning of the unit of the success criteria they will need to demonstrate by the end of the unit.
- Provides students with detailed scoring guide success criteria to guide their responses when they complete constructed-response assessment questions.

### **Assessment Quality**

- Presents specific criteria to ensure that the assessment questions are of high quality. These criteria include validity, reliability, freedom from bias, alignment, format, vocabulary, and thinking skill rigor.
- Explains and illustrates how to use assessment quality guidelines to critique and revise assessment questions.

## Recent Research Support

- Includes important formative assessment research support published after the original 2006 edition of *Common Formative Assessments* (e.g., John Hattie, *Visible Learning* and *Visible Learning for Teachers*; Dylan Wiliam, *Embedded Formative Assessment*; W. James Popham, *Transformative Assessment*; and others).

## The Role of Leaders

- Updates information for leaders on how to implement and sustain common formative assessments and create a culture of improvement within a school and school system.

Each chapter opens with the specific learning intentions for that chapter and, beginning in Chapter 3, a diagram showing the ten sequential steps of the CFA 2.0 process, with the current step highlighted. It then describes the rationale for that step, explains how to complete it effectively, and provides accompanying examples to illustrate it. Each chapter concludes with specific success criteria related to the content of the chapter that readers can use for individual reflection and/or team discussion.

## THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF LEADERS

School and district leaders who understand the significant potential that common formative assessments have for improving both the quality of instruction and the subsequent learning of all students play a vital role in implementing this process in their schools. For the CFA 2.0 process to truly take root within the culture of a school or district, leaders need to “champion” the process. They can do this by (1) making a commitment to fully understand the CFA 2.0 process through their own professional learning and then by (2) ensuring that the practice is systematically well implemented in each grade level and/or course.

One essential support that leaders can provide educators is to deliberately look for creative ways to rearrange daily teaching schedules to promote more opportunities for grade- and course-level teams to plan together. By freeing participating teachers to meet in grade-level and course/department teams, administrators provide teachers with both the support and structure critical to effectively plan and implement these important standards, instruction, and assessment practices.

Effective administrators know that for any educational practice to yield lasting changes, classroom teachers must invest in and take ownership of the entire process. Educators must be “at the table” in the research, design, implementation, and monitoring of progress on all-important changes that will impact curriculum, instruction, and assessment. When instituting a key change in professional practice, such as the implementation of CFAs, educators and leaders must continually work together to make that change work.

## **TOWARD A STUDENT-CENTERED ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

Before students can be fully at the center of the assessment process, educators need to have the core components of that process firmly in place within the day-to-day practices of their individual classrooms. They can then begin shifting ownership of that process into the hands of the students. As teacher teams continue to increase students’ involvement in the effective use of formative assessments, students can truly take charge of their own efforts to reach and exceed personal learning goals. The step-by-step CFA 2.0 process builds the important foundation that can ultimately lead to greater student involvement and ownership.

## **LET’S GET STARTED!**

*Common Formative Assessments 2.0* will provide busy educators and leaders with a practical, how-to guide filled with information, examples, and action steps to assist all K–12 grade- and course-level teams in making this completely re-envisioned process their own. My sincere hope is that this new expanded edition will prove to be a doable road map that you and your colleagues can follow to build your own “highway to aligned assessments,” one that makes CFAs an indispensable part of your important work of helping all students succeed.