



# Custom Assessments Drive Instructional Change

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT STANDARDS AND RIGOR  
ABOUND IN FRESNO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



*Photo courtesy of the Fresno Unified School District*

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Interim assessments not only serve as in-depth checkpoints for measuring how student learning is progressing, but they also allow educators to identify systemic trends and issues. Additionally, these assessments can inform data-driven instructional decisions, guide targeted interventions, and support differentiated instruction, enabling educators to better meet the diverse needs of students. In 2023, Fresno Unified School District, the third largest district in California, began developing interim assessments in partnership with [Cognia®](#), a global nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement for primary and secondary schools, and Edcite, an assessment platform that enables educators to implement state-aligned digital assessments.

Before the partnership, the district had gone through different iterations of interim assessments. In 2018, Fresno USD started using diagnostic assessments as interim assessments. Those tests were administered three times a year, but it could take students up to a week to complete each assessment.

In addition, while the diagnostic tool was beneficial (the district still uses it at the beginning of the academic year), it was not fully aligned to the standards teachers had to follow. Matt



Ward, an instructional superintendent at Fresno USD, was a middle school principal at that time. He had another issue with using the diagnostic tool for interim assessments: “We weren’t getting information that teachers use to plan instruction, instructional units, and interventions around.”

Another option available to the district was the interim assessments offered by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium system (California is a SBAC state). “We initially talked about using those,” Ward said. “In fact, we encourage our teachers to use them as part of a balanced assessment system.” But while the assessments were good, they were also open to the public. Anybody, including students, could see the assessments at any time. So, there was a risk of students focusing on finding answers to the test questions instead of mastering the relevant content.

Also, while the SBAC interim assessments were aligned to the same standards, they weren’t completely aligned to the sequence in which Fresno USD was teaching those standards. “There’s a lot of work that goes into deciding the order of how things are taught,” Ward said. “The SBAC interim assessments don’t always align well with our scope and sequence.”

## Building an Effective Partnership

Fresno USD first approached Edcite about interim assessments. “We’d already made the decision when I was still principal that we’d start giving standards-based interim assessments, and that we would use Edcite as our platform.”

But Fresno also needed experts in assessment design, so Edcite recommended CenterPoint (now part of Cognia). During initial conversations with Cognia, the Fresno USD team considered using their readymade standards-aligned interim assessments. “They were fine, but our concern was we wanted things that would match our actual scope and sequence,” Ward said.

He continued, “For us, it was important to be able to say to teachers, ‘This is assessing standards and learning that should have occurred in the quarter,’



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USD, Fresno

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versus ‘This is a random assessment which may or may not match the standards and curriculum that have been taught.’ We needed standards-aligned assessments, and we wanted ones that were built around our scope and sequence, so they needed to be customized and unique.”

One of the advantages of the new interim assessments is the shorter time frame required for administration. “One of our goals was to have assessments that could be given in 60 minutes,” said Ward. “The feedback we get is that it’s very much doable in two class periods.”

Since 2023 was the first time Fresno USD had become involved in customizing interim assessments, it took some time for the district team to figure out what worked for them. Ward reported that as district leaders have explained their needs and goals, the Cognia team has been extremely supportive and amenable to accommodating them. “Cognia has been easy to work with versus a company or an organization that’s like, ‘Well, this is what we’ll do. You tell us if it fits what you need,’” he said.

For example, when teachers viewed the interim assessment for the first quarter of the 2024–25 academic year prior to administration, one spotted a problem. At the beginning of the year, instructional time was adjusted; and thus, teachers had not been able to teach some of the content assessed in the first interim. The district team

*Photo courtesy of the Fresno Unified School District*





realized that 11 items within the 8 math interim assessments would have to be revised or replaced. Fresno USD contacted Cognia, and the teams were able to replace those questions before the scheduled assessment date. This change meant that students would be assessed on content that they had an opportunity to learn rather than being assessed on some content that they had never seen.



*Photo courtesy of the Fresno Unified School District*

“Cognia has been great about managing emergencies,” said Ward. “We’ve had to ask them to meet within an hour to deal with an emergency, and they’ve always been very available to us. We appreciate that a great deal.”

The district has also fine-tuned some of its policies and procedures around interim assessments. For example, in 2024, school principals and the district superintendent decided to allow teachers to see assessment questions several weeks ahead of the actual administration of the assessment. “The hope is that it would not, of course, lead them to teach those items – but rather that it would calibrate their instruction around the standards better,” explained Ward.

## Gaining Clarity Around Standards and Instructional Planning

Ward is encouraging Fresno USD’s teachers to use the assessments as a roadmap for instructional planning. “When you enter the instructional planning phase, you’ve got to be looking through the lens of what we want kids to know and be able to do at the end of a unit,” he said. “And one of the very best ways to do that is to have high-quality assessments that come at the end.”

He continued, “Our hope is that teachers would use the assessments to make informed instructional decisions in daily planning and larger unit planning. The idea is that by seeing how the standards are assessed, they can review their curriculum and determine whether it’s weak in some areas or focuses on concepts that don’t help students understand the standard at the depth and



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rigor required by the state.”

Ward reported that in October 2024, principals told him that some teachers were noticing a difference between the depth and rigor of what they taught and what the assessment required students to master. “You can’t pay enough to have teachers realize that on their own,” he said.

Another benefit Ward cited was teachers debating different interpretations of a standard properly. He shared the example of a librarian in the Fresno USD system who had a friendly debate with middle school ELA teachers about whether a narrative text could be used to assess reading informational standards.

At first, a few of the teachers argued that a narrative text couldn’t be used in that way. But the conversation caused those teachers to review related questions that had been released by the state. As a result, the teachers realized that they should use narrative texts to teach informational reading skills. Ward highlighted that strengthening teachers’ understanding of the standards could further support students’ success. “So, it’s leading to good conversations,” he concluded.

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—Matt Ward  
Instructional Superintendent  
USD, Fresno



# Looking to the Future

Fresno USD has 10 high schools, 17 middle schools, and four alternative schools. So, getting buy-in from all educators for the new interim assessments and new approach to instructional planning is still a work in progress. “Some of our sites are very good at looking at the evidence,” said Ward. “So, we want to continue to push the idea that assessments are a great lever towards school improvement and better student learning.”

Ward envisions using the assessment results to analyze approaches to instruction. “There are instructional strategies that are more ‘high leverage,’ and teachers that are experts in those strategies get better results,” he said. “So, can we identify those teachers and help implement their strategies in more classrooms?”

He also hopes to increase the frequency with which the district administers the interim assessments. “Right now, we do two interim assessments a year, and I would love to get in at least three,” he said. However, the district implements other assessments, such as the diagnostic assessment, which is given at the start of the year. “We still need to figure out how we’ve got to balance this with our diagnostic, and we don’t want to overburden instructional time,” Ward said.



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This year, the Fresno USD and Cognia teams are excited to review the assessment data together. The primary purpose of the data review meetings is to consider content that may need to be revisited this year to support student learning as well as curriculum and interim assessment adjustments for next year. Furthermore, Ward has indicated that “One of our goals with this project is to provide our teachers and school sites with some measures of predictability toward our end-of-year assessments. Sharing the data with Cognia so that they can help determine predictability and reliability will be great for us.”

Ward emphasized that real change in learning outcomes stems from embedding tests in a coherent system centered on student growth. Creating that system means knowing what students’ academic success looks like, building strategies to measure it meaningfully, and surrounding students with the support they need when they struggle. He said, “If you can use assessment to leverage all aspects of student learning—not just the monitoring piece—then it has the chance to influence student learning.”

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## About Cognia

Cognia® is a global, nonprofit improvement organization dedicated to helping institutions and other education providers grow learners, teachers, and leaders. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, and improvement services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 40,000 public and private institutions from early learning through high school in more than 90 countries, Cognia brings a global perspective to advancing teaching and learning.

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