

**Summary of the TES Cognitive Pretest**  
**Jack J. Pollard, Ph.D./Pride Surveys**

**Cognitive Pretest Protocol:**

Respondents were solicited through a Craig's List advertisement (see Attachment 1). Respondents were instructed to contact Pride surveys by the 800 number and were also provided Pride Survey's web address in the advertisement. After screening for eligibility, the Respondent's name and phone number were forwarded to me for contact. Phone contact occurred within 24 hours in all cases. Interviews were conducted with three days of initial contact for all Respondents except one. All Respondents who committed to the interviews did attend their appointments; there were no no-shows or cancellations.

Interviews lasted approximately 1:45 to 2:00 hours long. All were held in public locations, during daylight hours, in either a Starbucks or another coffee shop convenient to the Respondent. Two of the interview sessions were held with two Respondents simultaneously. This was an experiment on my part to see if the interaction between the Respondents would produce improved feedback from the Respondents. (It provided no improvement in the quality or productiveness of the interview.)

**Orientation to the Interview:**

I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the research. I made sure that all Respondents understood their rights, including: 1) that they did not have to answer any question they did not like; and 2) that they could terminate the interview at any time without penalty. (None did.) I then answered any questions the Respondent had about the interview or the purpose of the research.

Once the Respondent was oriented I presented to the Respondent a binder that showed all of the TQS survey items to be reviewed. Each binder included only a subset of the survey items because it wasn't practical to review all of the items in a single interview. Also included in the binder was a handout reminding respondents of what issues they should keep in mind when reviewing the items (see Attachment 2). Finally, for the last seven respondents, they were also provided three potential sets of response options, and asked to review the questions and the possible response options to make sure they "made sense" (See Attachment 3). Prior to getting started, my initial coaching to the Respondents was that any item that "didn't make sense right away, that you had to read twice, or that wasn't immediately transparent to you probably was a bad item. Please let me know when you encounter these items."

**First Pass Through the Survey Items: Identifying Problematic Items**

The items were sorted by topic, and items from one to three topic areas were typically presented on each page in the binder. (See an example in Attachment 5.) For each page of items, the Respondent was instructed to read through the survey items "like they were taking a survey" and to mark with a check mark those items that didn't "read well." At this point I let the Respondent read through all the items on the page without trying to elicit any information about why they checked the item. Without being obtrusive, I did observe as best as possible how the Respondent was working with the item, particularly if it appeared to be taking them a long time to read the item, or if they paused when

reviewing the item. This was actually easier than it sounds. The Respondents usually kept their pen over the item that they were reading (perhaps reflecting a paper grading behavioral habit?) which allowed me to monitor fairly easily. The occasional check mark also helped me stay oriented with their progress.

When the Respondent completed reading the page, I went over each item that received a check mark and asked them to tell me more about why they marked the item. Included in my questioning was a query about how the item could be made better. After hearing how the Respondent processed the item, and what unexpected cognitive events occurred during the reading, I often proposed alternative wordings to the question. The alternative wording was, first, a strategy to make sure I understood the cognitive issue reported by the Respondent, but was also useful in improving the item.

At this point, if the Respondent hadn't marked at least five items as "bad items" I asked them to go back again and see if they could find more items to check. I didn't insist that they check at least five items, but only encouraged them to do so.

### **Second Pass Through the Survey Items: Investigation of Additional Issues**

After completion of the first pass through the survey items, Respondents were asked questions designed to further probe their understanding and responses to the items. The questions were not asked in any particular order, or for all items, but were asked until it seemed that no meaningful information could be added with further inquiry. Also limiting the depth of the inquiries was the goal of each Respondent reviewing 150-200 survey items during the interview. The standard probes (which were very similar to Attachment 4) were:

1. What do you think this question is asking? What is the point of the question?
2. Do you think that this question would apply differently to teachers with different levels of experience, teaching elementary vs. secondary grades, or men vs. women?
3. I noticed that you [indicating a specific item]: [read the item twice, hesitated, stopped to think about the item]. Can you look at that item again and tell me more about how you read that item or how you understand the item?
4. Can you suggest a better way to word this question? [If suggested] How would that improve the question?

Throughout the process, Respondents often generated better versions of the survey item (sometimes much better!) than what we started with. When the alternative item wording was generated early enough in the interview schedule, I included the item for review by later Respondents. Respondents would sometimes mention related topics for which we had no questions on at all (e.g., potential problems with substitute teachers), and were very helpful in generating potential survey items for those topics.

After all of the probes were completed, the Respondent was instructed to turn to the next page of questions, and the process was repeated.

**Results:**

**The Respondents:**

We got a reasonable, not great, distribution of Respondents. The Respondents came from nine local school districts; four of the Respondents were employed in Seattle Unified. Below is the demographic breakdown:

<b>Sex:</b>	12 Females 3 Males
<b>Race:</b>	13 White 2 Non-white
<b>Age:</b>	3 <30 Yrs. 4 30-40 Yrs. 6 40-50 Yrs. 2 50+ Yrs.
<b>Experience:</b>	3 0-2 Yrs. 2 3-5 Yrs. 6 6-15 Yrs. 4 16+ Yrs.

**Free/Red. Lunch:** Range of 15% to 85%, with mean of 45%.

**Results of the Interviews:**

Some observations apply to all or a large portion of the survey items.

1. The Respondents consistently wanted greater specificity and less ambiguity in the survey items. For example, the survey item:

*(Item #357, Topic #000) Which BEST DESCRIBES your future intentions for your professional career? Work at my current school as long as I am able.*

Multiple Respondents saw this item as ambiguous. Does being able mean physically able? As long as I am not laid off? As long as the school remains open? All of these different interpretations would lead to very different answers. I never heard a Respondent comment that a proposed item was too narrow or too specific.

2. The Respondents seemed sensitive to items that were negatively worded (e.g., Item #165, Topic #100) The teachers in this school have faith in the integrity of the principal.] The feeling I had

was that teachers just want to see the world in positive terms, and disliked a negative tone. Many times the Respondent said something to the effect that they understood the item, it read fine, they know how they would respond, but they didn't like the item because "it just seemed negative."

3. Maybe this is the same issue, but the Respondents were also sensitive to passing negative judgments about their colleagues (but not about administrators!). Survey items that asked them to voice a negative opinion were not well liked.
4. The Respondents were about equally divided on whether the survey items were more effective in the interrogative (e.g., Do you like school?) or declarative (e.g., I like school.) format. I'm slightly biased towards the interrogative though. One Respondent's observation, which helped me understand the issue a little better, was that she didn't like the declarative mode. In the declarative mode the statement felt like it was words "being said for me," and the words were not exactly as she would express the idea. Therefore, she was somewhat less likely to endorse the item. But in a question format she said that she would accept that she was being asked a question, which might not express the idea exactly as she would. But, this was more like normal conversation, and she would respond more easily to the meaning of the survey item. This feedback came at the 14<sup>th</sup> interview, and I was not able to confirm this bias in processing. But it is consistent with observation #1 above.
5. In general, multiple items sharing a single stem got somewhat better response than stand alone items.
6. A conservative estimate is that Respondents need about 20-25 seconds per item. But the more specific, shorter, and concrete the item, the faster it was processed.
7. The phrase "standardized testing" was difficult and ambiguous for the Respondents. In Washington State the current standardized testing regime is called the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning). When questions involving standardized testing issues were reframed using WASL terminology, that solved a lot of problems. We'll have to use the local jargon for maximum effectiveness. Unfortunately, this may mean that we need to customize the form by state.
8. Lots of items vary in relevance to elementary vs. secondary teachers, and even to specific grade levels within elementary or secondary schools. There are also variations by experience level. This information can be used to guide skip pattern development. The rundown is as follows:

*Ability Level in the Classroom.* Secondary school classrooms usually have more tightly grouped ability levels. In elementary school, especially with mainstreaming, ability levels are all over the board. This has significant impacts on teacher prep, classroom interactions, and the overall workload.

*ATOD Issues.* There is no need for ATOD related questions for teachers in Grades 1-3, and very little need for Grade 4-6 teachers.

*Cell phones and texting in the classrooms.* Teachers are really bugged by this right now. This topic includes I-pods. Not an issue for elementary schools.

*Compensation.* Compensation is a big thorn in the side for the Respondents, but the specifics of the issue vary by experience level. See the discussion on page 8.

*Parent Volunteers/PTA Issues.* Respondents said that parent volunteers began fading out about 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and were non-existent in secondary schools. The same pattern for the PTA was also reported. We need to not ask secondary teachers about these issues.

*Post-Employment Professional certification.* In Washington at least, this is a major (and expensive) requirement for newly hired teachers. Experienced teachers have been grandfathered on this requirement.

*Professional Development.* For new teachers, this is all about keeping your head above water—how do I manage my classroom effectively. (“I don’t know the tricks of the trade yet.”) For experienced teachers this was more about pushing your skills into a new area of expertise. For all teachers, having relevant (or irrelevant) PD was an ongoing complaint.

*Relationships with Administrators.* I, unfortunately, didn’t pick this up until the end of the interview process. New and experienced teachers have very different relationships with their building-level administrators. New teachers are, logically, very tuned into the level of administrator support, and the quality of their relationships with the building-level administrator. They are trying to get established, hope to learn a lot from the administrator, but also can be anxious with their presence. Really experienced teachers tend to blow the administrator off. Whether an administrator is good or bad, the teacher believes they are likely be around long after the administrator leaves. The kinds of questions regarding administrator relationships should be tuned to the teachers’ experience levels.

### **Notes for Specific Items**

The Excel spreadsheet has the details of the responses to the individual items.

- Col. 1 Item Number: Every item has a unique number 1 to 526.
- Col. 2 Original Item Number: This was the number of the item on our original compilation. If the original item number is listed as NA, this means that it was an item created during the cognitive pretesting process, most often by a Respondent but occasionally by myself.
- Col. 3 New Topic Number: I created a new topic numbering system midway through the interviews. This helped me organize the items better and make sure that all the items had a sufficient number of reviews.

- Col. 4 Bad Item Count: A count of the number of times an item was marked as a problem by the Respondents. Remember that almost all of the items were reviewed by 5-6 Respondents, so three or more bad reviews means that at least 50% of the Respondents checked the item.
- Col. 5 TES Survey Items. The items as they were presented to the Respondents. Note that in this document I have separated the stem/leaf items into their topic categories by including the stem with all items. For presentation to the Respondents the original stem/leaf format was usually, but not always, maintained.
- Col. 6 Alternate Wording. The alternate wording was most often suggested by the Respondents, but often incorporated some help from me. Only occasionally did I generate an entirely new item, which is indicated by my initials at the end of the item. Often multiple alternatives were suggested by the Respondents.
- Col. 7 Other Comments. This column contains lots of things, but most often explanations for what Respondents did or didn't like about the item or my notes about how the Respondent processed the item. When the comment is more or less a direct quote from the Respondents I have prefaced the comment with an "R:".

### **Respondent Ideas on How to Conduct the Survey**

I presented our administration plan to the Respondents, asking for their advice. All thought we had a pretty good plan. They didn't really add much to our current plan.

Length of the Survey: Respondents, almost to a person, thought 30 minutes was the absolute maximum amount of time we could ask of the teachers. Fifteen to twenty minutes was the modal answer. Some Respondents had recommendations such as progress bars, miniature clocks to show how much time was left, or remaining question counts, as add-ons to improve teacher motivation. Skip patterns (although Respondents didn't use that term) were also considered essential (Don't make me answer questions that don't apply to me!) We'll also get more cooperation from some teachers if teachers can do the survey at home rather than trying to squeeze it into the school day. However, a couple of Respondents said that teachers really guard their time at home, and they would never take the survey at home. One really good Respondent suggestion was to get the district to incorporate the survey into an inservice day.

Recruitment: The respondents had a couple of good ideas. They said a video on the survey's web site, presenting instructions, explanation of the purpose, and maybe a cameo by the TEA Commissioner, would be useful in promoting the video. In the video, emphasize the importance of the survey, and how it is the teacher's chance to have their voice heard. Also, in the letter explaining the survey to the teachers, provide some question examples so teachers have a better feel for what's being asked. And, as examples, be sure to have questions that are going to stimulate the teachers' interest.

Incentives: They had no new concrete ideas on this topic. A couple of teachers said that positive word of mouth comments were going to get the survey completed more than any other factor.

Confidentiality: They were all OK with our current plans. One Respondent suggested offering at least some teachers an opportunity to answer the survey at a location of their choosing without having an access code. This could be used as a methods check to see if there is any variation in sensitive items depending upon security levels. Also, multiple Respondents said we should emphasize that Pride is an independent organization not affiliated with the school district or TEA.

Finally, I explained the process of suppressing results at the building- or district-level unless at least 10 teachers were in the analysis in order to maintain confidentiality of the results. Once I explained the process all Respondents felt comfortable with the level of confidentiality. However, on more than one occasion I had difficulty explaining the protection. This might be a difficult part of the introduction to the survey.

### **Topics the Respondents Thought We Had Missed Entirely**

Early on I was told that we needed to include some other topics on our survey. The Respondents also mentioned some special/limited interest topics that weren't relevant to our efforts. But when the topic seemed important, I solicited potential survey items to test, and added some of my own.

Substitute Teachers: I was completely taken by surprise by this issue. Lots of the Respondents say that they don't like the substitutes they typically get. They think it's because their districts pay so little (e.g., \$100/day). Respondents said subs can be poor quality, and undo lots of work that you've put into your class (e.g., discipline, routine). Substitute teachers can sometimes not be worth it. The net effect is a demoralizing feeling that you can't take a day off even when you're sick. Conversely, one teacher worked at a district which paid substitutes well (\$140/day) and she said that she had no difficulty with substitutes.

Parents in the Classroom: Parents in the classroom can be a help, but they can also be a hindrance because the teacher often has to do a lot of work to prepare for the volunteer (getting them oriented, making sure they have the materials they need, making sure they are interacting properly with the kids). Also, Respondents pointed out that there is NO training for teachers in how to manage parent volunteers; everybody just figures it out as they get experience.

Professional Certification: I don't know how big an issue this is in Texas or other states, but professional certification is a major pain for new teachers in Washington. Respondents said professional certification is required at five years after getting certification, and it is both an expensive and a non-functional process. I had never heard of this and was pretty skeptical until I confirmed it with other teachers. Multiple Respondents estimated that it costs about \$5,000 to get through the process, which includes mandatory coursework, portfolio development, mentoring by others, and a formal review committee which must be paid. This is relatively new, and already certified teachers were grandfathered. There is a national certification process which can be substituted for the Washington process; it was regarded as more real work, but about half as expensive.

Teachers as Social Workers: Multiple Respondents said that we didn't recognize how many different social issues that teachers have to deal with, and how much these issues are "time sucks." Some

teachers spend a lot of time helping families with social services. But there is also the issue of teachers trying to do too much. The importance of this issue correlated with the FRL percentage.

**The important topics that we partially missed:**

Compensation: We didn't devote enough items to this issue. The issue also varies a lot by experience level. New teachers are struggling to pay off their student loans, and are getting hammered by the certification requirement just as they're getting their head above water. Teachers at about 15 years experience are topping out in the pay scales, and are realizing they're never going to be making more money as a teacher. Lots of the experienced teachers reported that they compare themselves to their same age non-teaching peers and see themselves falling behind economically. This is a stressor for many.

School Resources: Support staff at school (e.g., nurses, counselors, etc.) were regarded as important resources that we hadn't asked much about. Also, early on, after a suggestion by a Respondent, I added a couple questions about teachers hoarding resources and feeling guilty for hoarding resources. The feeling guilty question got a really strange response—most said they do hoard resources (you have to unless you want to be spending your own money at the end of the year) but they clearly felt uncomfortable doing so.

Mentoring: There are formal mentoring programs, but many Respondents described them as hollow shells. Lots of mentoring occurs informally between pairs of new and experienced teachers who form a good relationship. We need to adjust some of our mentoring questions to reflect this issue.

**Topics we emphasized too much:**

ATOD Issues: We don't need so many questions on ATOD issues.

**Other minor topics:**

Unions: Union politics can cause some teachers grief.

Cell phones/Texting in the classroom by students. An irritant that is like having a mosquito bite on your face—not critical but it bugs them every class day.

### **Attachment 1: Craig's List Advertisement**

\$100: Teachers Needed for Survey Research Project

Pride Surveys ([www.pridesurveys.com](http://www.pridesurveys.com)) is developing a new survey to assess teacher working conditions. We are currently recruiting teachers in the Seattle/Eastside area for help with the survey development process.

\$100 compensation

2 hours of your time

You must be currently teaching at the elementary or secondary levels in a public school setting

Contact Pride Surveys at **800-279-6361**.

## Questions to Keep in Mind:

1. What do you think the question is trying to “get at”? Does it hit its mark?
2. Does the wording of the question make sense? Will it read the same to teachers in elementary vs. secondary schools? How about new vs. experienced teachers?
3. The question should not sound too formal, but not too casual either. Does it “sound OK” to you?
4. Is there a better way of asking the question?

**Attachment 3: Response options presented to the Respondents**

- |    |                         |                    |       |                            |
|----|-------------------------|--------------------|-------|----------------------------|
| 1. | Not at All              | A Little Bit       | Some  | A Lot                      |
| 2. | Never or<br>Hardly Ever | Once in<br>A While | Often | Always or<br>Almost Always |
| 3. | NO!                     | no                 | yes   | YES!                       |