



## **Summary of Focus Group Research**

**Conducted August 14, 2002 (Dallas) and August 29, 2002 (San Antonio)**

### **Orientation**

Baselice & Associates, Inc. was retained to conduct focus groups for the purpose of studying attitudes and opinions of parents with children who have taken the TAAS test. A general population focus group was conducted at Focus on Dallas on August 14, 2002 among 10 adults, and a Hispanic focus group was conducted among 11 adult Hispanics at Galloway Research in San Antonio on August 29, 2002.

### **Key Findings**

1. Respondents like their children's teachers and the efforts schools use to communicate with parents, but they do not like them teaching students how to pass a standardized test such as the TAAS test.
2. Respondents were not familiar with the name of the test that is replacing the TAAS test.
3. The notion of a test designed to measure a student's knowledge and skills was well received.
4. The word "knowledge," more so than the word "skills," was retained as something that makes the new TAKS test different and better than the TAAS test. Seven of the ten respondent pairings incorporated the word knowledge in their promotional campaign rhetoric.
5. As with the quantitative research (statewide survey), Hispanic respondents were more supportive than the general population of standardized testing.

## **Introduction**

### **What do you like most about your school district?**

Respondents had specific and varied things they like most about their school districts. These ranged from being able to choose the school within the school district (mentioned by Garland residents) to free speech therapy to hiring alumni of the school to be teachers (mentioned by Lewisville). Most respondents had good things to say about the children's teachers.

*The San Antonio respondents' answers ranged from voucher programs to special handicap programs to the communication between parents and teachers. Over half (six out of eleven) of the respondents were pleased with the communication aspect of their schools. Respondents cited several ways in which their schools have made an effort to communicate with parents such as sending students home with informative handouts, scheduling student-teacher conferences, and employing online services such as e-mail.*

Robert: "One of the things that I've noticed that the school district does is that they hire alumni that went through that school.... they seem to care more."

Melissa: "I do like the idea that they do have the magnet programs. One of the good things they do have is speech therapy...Dallas did that for free."

Debra: "My son has gotten all great teachers."

*Gabriel: "I think the communication system they have. They send newsletters, what their working on, what their objectives are. The mail outs, the schedules, the calendars."*

### **What is your biggest gripe about what teachers do today? (next question is related)**

Respondents expressed concern that teachers today are focusing so much of their time teaching students how to take the TAAS test. Notice this came up early in the discussion.

Shirley: "My concern is that, I'm from New Mexico, and there the teachers were more involved with the students on teaching to them what they need to know. Here in Texas, it's more like they're so worried about the TAAS test, that that's the main thing that they try to teach and that's it. Everything else comes after that."

### **What is really different about teaching today in public schools versus when you were a kid?**

Five out of ten respondents mentioned that students are being rushed to learn more at an earlier age and teachers are placing unrealistic expectations on their kids.

*Likewise, Hispanic respondents (four out of eleven) felt that students are being pushed more. Three respondents believed that students today have more opportunities and school programs. In addition, respondents claim that teachers tolerate more from students now than in the past.*

Debra: "Everything seems to come at an earlier age now."

Debi: "They're pushed a lot harder."

Shirley: "Another thing that they do too, in middle school, is they teach the children 'The Test' so they go to school to learn the test, the answers to the test."

Leonard: *"They have so much to offer these days. Also, they tolerate too much from kids."*

## **The TAAS Test**

### **Do you think that teachers spend more time teaching the basics these days or more time teaching the TAAS test?**

Eight out of ten respondents believed teachers are spending more time teaching the TAAS. The current increase in time teachers spend teaching the TAAS was generally viewed as a negative issue among the respondents.

### **Do you favor or oppose standardized testing such as the TAAS test?**

Half of the respondents favored standardized testing such as the TAAS, while three opposed it and two had no opinion. Those who favored standardized testing believe it is a good way to rank students in order to have an idea of where to place them among their peers.

*Seven out of eleven Hispanic parents favored standardized testing while four opposed. The main reason given for favoring standardized testing was that it is a good way to measure a child's progress or level of achievement. Those who opposed the test feel that teachers are spending too much time teaching how to take the test instead of teaching the basics. Nine out of eleven respondents believed that standardized testing is used as a tool in which to gauge school district's performance while only two respondents viewed it as placement tool to determine whether students are ready for the next grade level.*

Robert: "Last year, my two younger ones took it and both of them were actually pretty excited about it. I don't like it too much but that's the curriculum we have. We stop teaching and we stop preparing for a test. It's no longer progressing with whatever subject they're on. It's now this is what's going to be on the TAAS test, this is what you need to learn."

Alvin: *"I'm in favor of some measurement of retention, but as far as the TAAS test is concerned, they hinge way too much on it."*

Leonard: *"I favor it. It tells you if your child needs help in certain areas."*

### **What do you think is the purpose of the standardized test?**

As previously noted, the vast majority of respondents viewed standardized testing as a placement tool for the student. However, there was an attitude among the respondents that standardized testing is often used as a means for schools or school districts to promote themselves at the expense of students.

*The views expressed by the Hispanic respondents were analogous to the views of the Dallas respondents. Both groups were hesitant to accept standardized testing as anything more than a means of comparing their child to other students.*

Joan: “To find out where the kids are in relation to other kids in the district and the state. And also, I think they use it for their own benefit, to toot their own horn. And I also think, to see what they need to teach.”

Robert: “The things I hear, especially at the schools, is they get different types of status attached to the school. It attracts the better teachers, it gives them bragging rights. I don’t know that it necessarily does anything for my kids.”

### **How many people think that kids should have to pass the TAAS test in order to get to the next grade?**

Only two out of ten respondents agreed that kids should have to pass the TAAS test in order to get to the next grade. Several respondents experienced their child doing poorly or even failing portions of the TAAS, which resulted in the child having to take summer school to improve their scores. Therefore, the TAAS can be viewed as a helpful tool to alert parents and teachers of a student’s deficiency in certain subjects at an early stage.

*Among the Hispanic group, the ratio of agree to disagree was almost equal. Five out of eleven agreed and four out of eleven disagreed that kids should have to pass the TAAS in order to get to the next grade level.*

### **What would you do to improve the TAAS test?**

The two main improvements cited by the respondents were 1) to develop the reporting of scores to make it easier for parents to understand and 2) not stressing students so much about the test. A slight majority, six out of ten, indicated schools that perform better on the TAAS receive more funding.

*The Hispanic group also indicated not stressing students so much about the test as a way to improve the TAAS test.*

Shirley: “My son is an honor roll student and he was a nervous wreck. He’s a nervous wreck every time. The higher the scores are, the more money can come inside the schools.”

Louis: “I think basically, getting the parents a lot of information.”

Terry: "They make a big deal. They made like a big pep rally before and then if you all pass the teachers do something for the kids."

**Have you seen read or heard anything recently about a new test that is going to replace the TAAS test?**

Four out of ten respondents had seen, read or heard about a new test. Three of these respondents could identify this test as the TAKS but all were unaware of what it stood for.

*Even though all the Hispanic parents had children who had started the new school year, only six out of eleven had seen, read or heard about a new test. However, all but one of these informed Hispanic parents had seen, read or heard about the test prior to the beginning of school.*

**Has what you seen read or heard about this TAKS test given you a positive or negative impression?**

Upon direct query, the vast majority of respondents (nine out of ten) did not know enough about the new TAKS test to have a positive or negative impression.

*The six out eleven Hispanic parents who had seen, read or heard about the TAKS maintained the impression they had with the TAAS. Most viewed it as another stressful, placement tool with a different name.*

Debra: "I heard it was going to be harder and it was going to have more subjects such as history and science and composition to where they're going to have questions without the multiple choice."

Amy: "It's [TAKS] the same thing, they just renamed it."

**Would you have a more positive or more negative impression of the TAKS test if you understood that this new TAKS test was designed to test overall knowledge and skills rather than just what they can memorize?**

There was a strong positive response among all respondents if the TAKS would test overall knowledge and skills.

*Similarly, the vast majority of Hispanics (ten out of eleven) had a strong positive impression about the TAKS if it tests overall knowledge and skills. Parents liked this aspect of the TAKS because their child will no longer simply memorize to pass the test.*

Lottie: "A child just memorizing is not really learning."

Nan: "Knowledge is something that you are going to use."

## Agree/Disagree

### **Texas schools have made major strides but we must continue the course of reform to secure Texas' future?**

Most respondents agreed that Texas schools have made some strides but they are basically the same.

Hank: "I would think that they would have had to improve to expose kids to the technologies that are being developed out there. I think they've regressed in terms of teaching them conduct and common sense."

### **We need to test Texas students so we can determine what children are learning, and just as important, find out what children are not learning so we can help them?**

Seven out of ten respondents agreed that Texas students need to be tested. Those who disagreed suggested either 1) a different type of test without such high stakes to determine what subjects students need help on or 2) simply determining this by identifying low grade averages in specific subjects.

*There was overall agreement among the Hispanic respondents to test students so schools could determine children's knowledge and skills.*

### **Instead of testing what children can simply memorize, the TAKS test will measure their knowledge in key subject areas.**

*Only the Hispanic group was asked whether this statement would make them agree or disagree with the TAKS test. All respondents favored or agreed with the TAKS test if it would measure their child's knowledge rather than memorization.*

### **If teachers teach their curriculum, then the TAKS test will take care of itself.**

*There was strong agreement among all Hispanic respondents that the TAKS test should be able to take care of itself if teachers follow the guidelines of the curriculum.*

### **Having discussed it more, do you favor or oppose Texas public schools administering the new standardized test known as the TAKS test?**

When directly queried again, half of the respondents favored the new TAKS test. While knowledge is something respondents want a standardized test to measure, the emphasis placed on the TAAS test in recent years overshadows some of the positive aspects of the new test.

*A significant majority (ten out of eleven) of Hispanics favored the TAKS if it will be knowledge and skills based, and depending on the basis of how it is administered.*

Lottie: "Favor if taught less throughout the school year with emphasis on actual learning."

*Nan: "Favor if testing knowledge and skills is truly followed through."*

**Do you think the TAKS test will be better for students than the TAAS test?**

The same respondents, five out of ten, who now favor the TAKS test, also believe that the TAKS will be better for students than the TAAS test. The other respondents reserved judgment.

Hank: "The people who created the test had to have learned something from the feedback or fallout from the TAAS."