



Instrument Showcase:

# Cognia Teacher Observation Tool

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## The opportunity

Improvement is driven by measurement and data. Educators can be more successful when provided regular, targeted feedback regarding behaviors, actions, and dispositions in the classroom. In order to support schools and teachers in their continuous improvement journey, Cognia® developed its Teacher Observation Tool in 2021. This formative observation tool is designed to promote teachers' professional and continuous improvement journeys toward the practice of learner-centric instruction and effective teaching. The observation tool provides useful, relevant, and quantifiable data on the extent to which classroom teachers engage students in learning. Furthermore, each of the five dimensions measured by the observation tool connect back to the Cognia Performance Standards and key characteristics, which describe research-based and practitioner-informed conditions for effective teaching and learning along with organizational effectiveness.

The Cognia Teacher Observation Tool was born out of a partnership with the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE). To accompany the wide use of Cognia's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot® 2.0), an observation tool that focuses on learner-centric environments and active engagement, ALSDE requested the development of a Teacher Observation Tool to focus on teacher behaviors and actions. This tool is designed to provide formative feedback and specifically examines how teachers set up, facilitate, and manage environments to promote learning.

## The instrument

In order to develop the Teacher Observation Tool, the development team began with a thorough review of academic research and literature centered around essential topics, such as teacher effectiveness, characteristics of effective instruction,

healthy instructional environments, observation protocols, and methods of teacher assessment. The development team paid close attention to instructional modalities, examining not only practices and methods for face-to-face instruction but also blended and online models. With the primary aim of designing a tool that provides rich formative data to inform clear, focused conversations about teaching practices, the development team synthesized available research into five dimensions and 23 items. By rating the items within these five overarching dimensions related to high-quality instruction, administrators and teachers can identify crucial elements to help strengthen and sustain effective teaching practices:

- **Culture and Climate Dimension:** A learning environment that is created and sustained in which all learners are cared for, feel safe, have a sense of belonging, and feel secure to share their thoughts.
- **Learning Dimension:** Processes established to ensure learners have opportunities to demonstrate an understanding of the content and apply that knowledge and acquisition of skills
- **Essentials Dimension:** Core competencies demonstrated by an effective teacher, such as presence and disposition, pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and management of the learning environment
- **Agency Dimension:** Actions that foster learners' ability to self-direct and self-regulate their learning
- **Relationship Dimension:** Actions that foster healthy, positive connections between the teacher and learners

Within each dimension, between three to six items measure specific and observable practices to spark dialogue and deepen understanding of the instructional environment. Each Teacher Observation Tool item is aligned to recent research on teaching practices and further aligned to the Cognia Performance Standards.

The Teacher Observation Tool underwent both a pilot and field test between 2020–2021 to ensure the tool and its items were relevant, accessible, and meaningful to schools. Overall, the Teacher Observation Tool demonstrates high reliability ( $\alpha$  ranging from 0.81 to 0.86 by domain, 0.96 overall;  $\omega$  ranging from 0.82 to 0.88 by domain, 0.98 overall), and sufficient convergent and discriminant validity evidence to demonstrate the dimensions as separate but related. Additional validity and reliability evidence for the instrument was gathered during the field test and in subsequent analyses described in the [Teacher Observation Tool Technical Brief](#).

## The discoveries

Between July 2022 and April 2023, a total of 2,127 schools completed over 42,500 observations using the Cognia Teacher Observation Tool.

### Key strengths across the observations:

- Relationship was the highest scoring dimension (average score of 3.43 out of 4), specifically:
  - Over 94% of observations showed teachers promoting respectful and caring interactions toward and between learners.
  - About 93% of teachers were observed preserving learner dignity while attending to the learner's individual needs.
- Culture and Climate was the second highest scoring dimension (average score of 3.38 out of 4) across all observations:
  - Over 94% of teachers were seen treating learners equitably.
  - Over 91% of teachers were fostering an environment that embraced all learners.
- In 94% of observations for the Essentials, across all grade bands and subjects, teachers overwhelmingly showed that they deliver and/or facilitate the lesson with knowledge and confidence.

### Additional Findings:

- Agency was the lowest scoring dimension across observations, with the lowest scoring item showing less than 57% of teachers give learners choices about the learning activities or tasks.
- Around 78% of observations showed teachers building learners' growth mindset and self-efficacy or providing assistance for learners to navigate and monitor their learning.
- About 73% of observations found that teachers adapt instructions and/or activities that meet individual learner's needs.
- Teachers were seen encouraging learners to persevere with or seek challenging activities or tasks in 79% of observations.
- Approximately 78% of observations noted teachers implementing lessons and/or activities that stimulate learners to use higher-order thinking skills.

## The implications

The findings represented include data from across Cognia's network, and therefore should be reflected upon in relation to your school's local context. While the results in the aggregate were generally consistent across grade levels, subject areas, and regions, this does not imply that they represent the strengths and opportunities of each individual school in the sample. Furthermore, while these scores may indicate that a certain behavior or action was not observed, it is still possible that the core construct is present and occurring. One might ask, for example, how these behaviors and actions might be better and more explicitly demonstrated during classroom interactions.

### **Strengths:**

Encouragingly, the observation data paints a positive picture of teachers' relationships and abilities to create and maintain positive learning environments. Both the Relationship Dimension and the Culture and Climate Dimension indicated strong levels of agreement across all items. This provides evidence that teachers care about respecting and including all learners. Other high-performing items relate to teachers' professionalism, knowledge, experience, and confidence, as well as their ability to clearly communicate expectations. Effective time management is also highlighted in the data, collectively reinforcing that teachers are capable, caring, and committed to their students and maximizing learning.

### **Opportunities:**

Improvement opportunities highlight areas where specific behaviors or actions were less frequently observed. (As discussed earlier, these may or may not represent the same opportunities present at your school but serve to frame overall improvement priorities across Cognia's network.) The domain with the lowest scoring items in the sample was Agency. Specifically, items related to learner choice in activities or tasks, growth mindset, perseverance, and assistance in monitoring learning progress, all showed room for growth, with between 22–24% of observations indicating “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree.” These findings corroborate insight gleaned from other data collection, including ratings on the Cognia Performance Standards during accreditation reviews. Consistently, the findings show that demonstration of learners engaged in the monitoring of their own learning, and instruction tailored to the individual needs of learners, are growth opportunities.

Although many items were frequently rated as “Agree” or “Strongly Agree,” it is worth noting that these describe conditions that should be present in all classrooms. It is therefore important to acknowledge that in addition to the

opportunities within the Agency dimension, in more than 20% of observations, observers either disagreed or strongly disagreed that instruction was adapted to meet individual learner's needs and that higher-order thinking was stimulated. Collectively, this information illuminates a chance to increase educator focus, resources, and support toward differentiated and learner-centered instruction, emphasizing choice, growth mindset, agency, and self-efficacy.

## **The support**

Remember: what is measured, improves. Cognia develops evidence-gathering instruments to help drive improvement prioritization and formative feedback opportunities within schools. Cognia offers a variety of services and solutions to advance teacher practices, and encourages the Teacher Observation Tool to be used in concert with two additional tools: the Professional Practice Diagnostic and eleot.

- The Professional Practice Diagnostic was developed to complement the Teacher Observation Tool and allows leaders to provide ongoing feedback in areas such as the teacher's professional disposition, adherence to the institution's expectations, and adaptability to change. The diagnostic contains items that align to the same five dimensions of the Teacher Observation Tool.
- When used together with eleot, the Teacher Observation Tool allows educators to get a 360-degree view of teaching and learning in the classroom. The eleot provides a clear picture of student actions to indicate how well students are engaged in the classroom; the Teacher Observation Tool rounds out the picture by providing a nuanced portrait of what teachers do to provide effective and engaging instruction. At the district level, reports and data analytics can shape the focus of professional learning to address common challenges, paying attention to nuances for grades K–5, middle schools, and high schools.

Cognia has developed online asynchronous Learning Labs within its Cognia Learning Community, aligned to each Teacher Observation Tool dimension. Cognia's leader-centered Learning Labs empower instructional leaders with the tools and techniques to implement formative observations within cycles of professional learning that are data-informed and learner-focused. The teacher-centered Learning Labs emphasize tangible, research-based strategies aligned to each dimension and are intended to improve instructional practices and student opportunities to learn. Schools and systems can use the library to develop customized learning pathways or they can work with Cognia Learning Facilitators to design professional learning plans.

Cognia is committed to being a supportive partner for schools seeking to promote effective learning environments. The Teacher Observation Tool resources, such as its technical reports, interpretation guides, and training supports, are available to all members via a partnership site. Furthermore, Cognia's customized professional learning services can develop skills and strategies such as engaging classroom environments, active learning, and growth mindset, all of which align to the Cognia Performance Standards, key characteristics, and the Teacher Observation Tool dimensions. For more information on available services and which may be best for your school, contact your local Cognia representative.

## 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 professional services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 36,000 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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