

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative

Teacher Working Conditions Data— How to Effectively Use Findings



The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Initiative provides data on issues critical to improving student achievement and keeping teachers. The initiative provides customized reports for almost 2,000 of the state's 2,200 schools. The unique data represents the perceptions of those who understand these conditions best—the educators who teach in them every day. Collecting and analyzing this data allows for data-driven conversations regarding the integration of working conditions reforms and school improvement planning.

Moving from data to action is contingent upon schools using data appropriately and committing to a sustained reform effort. This brief provides guidance for educators and community members to effectively use teacher working conditions data.

The Data Should...

1... be used as an impetus for broader conversations regarding the climate, conditions and culture of schools and how they affect student learning and teacher retention. The findings from the survey provide a good entry point into complex discussions using multiple sources of school data.

2... be considered a snapshot in time of faculty perceptions regarding their school and a baseline tool for measuring improvement on a host of critical working conditions.



The Data Should Not...

1... be considered a stand-alone, "magic bullet" for curing all that ails a school. The context of every school's unique culture and programs should be considered along with working conditions data. Consequently, outsiders considering school data should be sensitive and aware of the multitude of school factors influencing results on the survey.

2... be considered a permanent and static descriptor of any school's working conditions, regardless of how positive or negative results may appear. The impact of working conditions are cumulative and residual over time—they are bigger than any individual, and schools often feel the effects of positive and negative influences that may be beginning to change over time.

The findings from the survey provide a good entry point into complex discussions using multiple sources of school data.

The Data Should...

3... be considered as an accurate representation of the working conditions that teachers actually experience in their schools. In every state where working conditions initiatives have been conducted to date, including North Carolina, teachers' perceptions of working conditions have been directly related to the reality of the conditions in their schools. For example, teachers spending more time outside the school day on teaching activities expressed the most concern about time available to complete their jobs.

4... drive educators, stakeholders and the community toward more complex conceptions of teacher working conditions. Working conditions involve more than keeping the lights on in a building and paying teachers sufficiently. The initiative considers a comprehensive environment for teaching and learning, including professional development, time, empowerment and leadership, and how these factors influence teaching practices.

5... be a way to ensure that all educators—teachers and principals alike—have a similar understanding about whether working conditions are present in the school and whether efforts are being made to address them. While some level of difference in perceptions should be expected, it is essential to recognize where the divergent views, particularly of teachers and administrators, could limit the potential for meaningful reform.

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The Data Should Not...

3... be viewed as merely an opportunity for teachers to vent a litany of complaints. There are negative and positive elements of the working conditions data in every North Carolina school, and the degree to which teachers express dissatisfaction is undeniably linked to the real conditions within their respective schools. This is not a satisfaction survey. These are teachers' perceptions of the presence of important, research-based factors in their school that affect student learning and teacher retention.

4... be considered an attempt to merely document the physical structure and related resources in a school building. While physical facilities and resources are included in the research base, other complex factors influencing the professional teaching practices of educators are also measured.

5... be considered an accountability tool for principal performance. The revised North Carolina principal evaluation will focus on the extent to which schools use working conditions data for improvement—not on the data results. The “leadership” category of the working conditions survey is intentionally broad to incorporate multiple sources of school leadership. Principals should consider where administrator perceptions differ considerably from teachers. School leadership should encourage analysis of the data without fear of reprisal. Working conditions are about schools, not individuals, and it will take the entire school to improve them.

The Data Should...

6... inform school and district level decisions about scheduling, professional development offerings, opportunities to support and cultivate teacher leadership, and investments in facilities and resources. By making the working conditions data part of the school improvement planning process, findings from each working condition domain can be seamlessly integrated into the pre-existing and emerging school reform programs at every school in North Carolina.

7... be viewed within the context of progress from year-to-year and relative to other groups of schools across a district and the state. The findings are reported with bars representing the school, district and state averages for working condition questions and domains. North Carolina schools will also benefit from efforts to document and share best practices from schools effectively addressing working conditions.

8... help districts move from understanding working conditions to taking action toward reform. Tools have been developed to help community members, teachers, principals, administrators and policymakers act on the data. The teacher working conditions toolkit (www.teacherworkingconditions.org) provides a research library, resource database and school level examples of working condition reforms. NC Network has developed a blueprint for School Improvement Teams. The Principals Executive Program and Teacher Academy have developed specific professional development around working conditions issues.

The Data Should Not...

6... be used to unilaterally and/or arbitrarily judge a school's effectiveness in any working conditions area. Every finding should be considered a lever to drive reform and not to fuel accountability grades or measures.

7... be considered within a vacuum of a single school, with fear of comparisons to another single school. The results will prove more meaningful if considered relative to a group of similar North Carolina schools. Schools will also benefit from comparing progress in their own working condition schools from 2002, 2004 and 2006.

8... be a one-shot conversation or a report that sits on the shelf. The data is only as useful as its potential application for improving real schools.

The data should help districts move from understanding working conditions to taking action toward reform.



The Data Should...

9... help drive local level policy decisions.

Reviewing data results with local boards of education, county commissioners, legislators and decision makers can ensure that policies and resources are more responsive to the most pressing needs of schools and districts. Following the 2004 survey, one North Carolina school district used below-average results on their facilities and resources domain to help convince county commissioners to pass a \$90 million bond referendum on school facilities—the first successful facilities bond referendum requiring a tax increase in more than 50 years for the district.

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10... help North Carolina policymakers make more informed decisions

about statewide policies that directly address teachers' greatest concerns. For example, House Bill 1151 passed in 2006 helps to address the considerable and persistent concerns in the time domain, ensuring School Improvement Teams create a plan to provide all teachers with a duty-free lunch and planning period every day.

The Data Should Not...

9... be over- or underrepresented in local policy decision-making.

Local policymakers should neither ignore the power of working conditions data, nor make policy without the context of other data points and school context.

10... be collected without the continued buy-in and support of all state policymakers and officials who add credibility to the survey and ensure that results spur meaningful policy outcomes in North Carolina.

Written
by the
Center for
Teaching Quality in
February 2007
for the
Teacher Working
Conditions
Advisory Board

