

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative

Teacher Working Conditions— Reforming Policy and Practice



Many education policymakers and stakeholders are increasingly recognizing teacher working conditions as an essential element for retaining teachers and improving student achievement.

Hearing directly from school-based educators, who intimately understand working condition issues, enables educators, stakeholders and policymakers to make data-driven decisions as they strive to make schools better places to work and learn. The data also provide opportunities for districts and schools to reform practices on the ground in ways that will have the greatest impact on teaching and learning.

Data collected and analyzed by the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) show powerful empirical links between teachers' working conditions and student achievement at all school levels. The research indicates that teachers' perceptions of certain working conditions significantly influence student achievement, academic growth and teacher turnover.

STATE POLICY REFORMS

These findings, coupled with state-level survey data for all teachers within a state, can prove to be a tremendous catalyst in moving a state agenda forward to improve teacher working conditions. North Carolina has considered policy reforms to address teachers' greatest areas of concern regarding working conditions.

- *Working conditions is now a permanent part of the North Carolina education reform process*, as evidenced by available funding for the survey every two years and the creation of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Advisory Board in the 2005 Appropriations Act (Senate Bill 622).
- *The state has increased the level of rigor expected of school principals in creating positive working conditions and provided needed support.* The state has rewritten principal standards to incorporate teacher recruitment, retention and school climate. All Masters of School Administration programs will be evaluated based on these standards and a new evaluation instrument is being created which will, amongst other things, assess whether principals

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use data to improve working conditions. Additionally, all new principals are required to take professional development funded by the state (an Executive Order for \$125,000) and offered through the Principals Executive Program on creating positive working conditions.

- ***Investments have been made to support the use of data and spreading of best practice.*** The NC Network received funding to create a blueprint for School Improvement Teams in integrating working conditions results into school improvement planning. Funding also helped NC Network conduct the state's Real DEAL (Dedicated Educators, Administrators and Learners) conference to share best practices in schools with positive working conditions and high student achievement. The Teacher Academy receives \$2 million annually to provide professional development in the original DSSF (Disadvantaged Students Supplemental Fund) districts to improve teaching quality, with a focus on working conditions reform. Additional analyses have been conducted by the Center for Teaching Quality for DSSF districts and low performing high schools. Turnaround plans are being analyzed in low performing high schools to ensure working conditions data is incorporated and reform strategies address teacher concerns.
- ***The state has ensured that all schools provide sufficient non-instructional time for all teachers.*** In three consecutive iterations of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, teachers have indicated that time is the most critical working condition to them in improving student learning and expressed the most negativity about whether or not essential time elements are in place. In 2005, the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission completed a study of elementary schools that offer at least five hours per week of planning time for teachers. Passed in July 2006, House Bill 1151 now requires School Improvement Teams (SIT) to develop a plan to provide at least five hours of duty-free instructional planning time per week and a daily duty-free lunch period for every teacher. Making these changes will not be easy both due to scheduling, and problems with the SITs. Only half (57 percent) of North Carolina teachers agree that they are involved in decision making about educational issues. Similarly, only 40 percent of North Carolina educators indicated their school improvement team (SIT) was elected, although state law requires that teachers vote for SIT. Governor Easley has called for the State Board of Education to ensure adherence to the statutory requirements in G.S. 115C-105.27 for constituting SIT teams.

DISTRICT REFORMS

Many individual school districts across the state have created professional development opportunities to study and understand working condition survey results in various training sessions. Some North Carolina school districts have established teacher working conditions advisory groups with representatives from schools in a district.

- The Iredell-Statesville schools convened a group of teachers of the year from schools across the district to analyze data trends and create district level working condition goals. The results and data from the survey were part of an advocacy strategy to convince the County Commissioners to place a bond referendum on the ballot. Influenced in part by working conditions data demonstrating that the district's teachers were less likely than their peers across the state to say they had adequate professional space, voters passed a \$ 90 million bond, the first successful bond campaign requiring a tax increase in more than 50 years.
- In Guilford County North Carolina, the Guilford County Education Alliance has partnered with Guilford County Public Schools and the Guilford County Association of Educators to both analyze working conditions results and mobilize public support for improving working conditions. By helping schools and community members understand the most pressing needs of schools across the district, the Guilford County Education Alliance is spearheading an effort to bring resources and support to working condition concerns identified by educators in Guilford schools, with support from the district.

Principals and teachers in many other districts have worked to create school and district improvement plans that incorporate working condition reforms. And the opportunities to learn from the experiences and context of other districts familiar with working condition reforms are increasing exponentially. Districts can create matched pair comparisons of districts in or out of state with similar size and student demographics.

SCHOOL REFORMS

Many schools simply lack the time, capacity and commitment to fully understand and act on this data. In response to this challenge, CTQ has worked with a variety of partners to develop

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The Teacher Working Conditions Toolkit (www.teacherworkingconditions.org) was developed to help communities and schools better understand and respond to the data from the 2004 Teacher Working Conditions Survey. The Toolkit helps users identify effective strategies for achieving school reform and includes examples of schools that have addressed teacher working conditions successfully, checklists and concrete ideas to provide a roadmap for activity on working condition reforms, and background research to give users some theoretical perspective in identifying school reform strategies.

- South Topsail Elementary School in Pender County has improved working conditions scores on both the time and empowerment domain by involving teachers in the scheduling process. At South Topsail, teachers are encouraged to attend School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings and present their ideas for improving the school. The current school schedule was presented at a SIT meeting by a young PE teacher. In accordance with her proposal, the school adopted a 4+1 block schedule that provided a 45-minute planning period for every teacher.

State and local policies and school practices across North Carolina must be aligned as part of a systematic and sustained effort to improve working conditions for all teachers and students. Policymakers, practitioners, stakeholders and community members must work together to ensure that state and local policy, along with school practices, all contribute to an effort to organize schools where teachers and students can succeed at the highest levels.

**Written by the Center for Teaching Quality in February 2007 for the
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