

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative Strategies to Create Non-instructional Time for Elementary School Teachers



TEACHERS SAY TIME MATTERS MOST FOR IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING

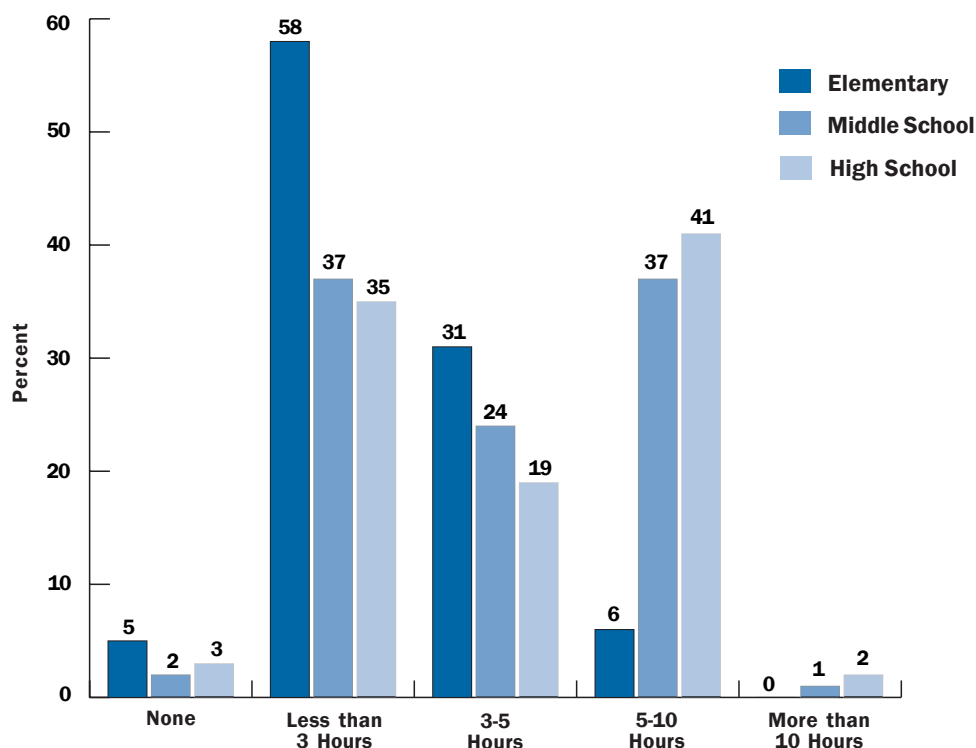
Results from the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey indicate that educators believe that time is the most critical working condition for improving student learning—more important than leadership, empowerment, professional development and resources. However, it is also the area where teachers are *least likely* to note that positive working conditions are in place at their school. This is particularly true at the elementary school level. Consider the following time results from the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey:

- More than half of North Carolina educators reported receiving three hours or less of non-instructional time in an average week, and 77 percent less than five hours. At the elementary level, 63 percent reported receiving less than three hours (Figure 1).
- Only about one-third (37 percent) of elementary teachers agreed that the non-instructional time they receive is sufficient.

To address these challenges, in 2006, Governor Easley signed into law House Bill 1151 (Session Law 2006-153), requiring schools 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. Recognizing some of the inherent challenges in creating non-instructional time for elementary teachers, the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Advisory Board, in collaboration with The Center for Teaching Quality and with generous support from the Karen and Christopher Payne Family Foundation, convened a meeting of nine elementary school principals to learn how they create and protect non-instructional time for teachers.

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Figure 1. Percentage of Teachers Indicating Time Available for Planning and Collaboration in an Average Week by School Type



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The participating schools were selected based on overwhelmingly positive responses to the time-related items on the 2006 Teacher Working Conditions survey, and attention was paid to ensure that schools represented diversity in size, location, and student demographics. While the nine schools represent a variety of local circumstances, common themes emerged in their approach to non-instructional time.

Limited Resources Pose Challenges, but Those Challenges Are not Insurmountable

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The different circumstances of the nine schools forced them to be creative and innovative in finding ways to provide non-instructional time for teachers that fit their school context. Yet, all of the school leaders described a common belief that time to plan and collaborate is an essential and necessary element of teaching and all demonstrated a commitment to incorporating that time into the school schedule.

While there is not one solution that will work in every context, the schools followed a similar path in creating schedules that provided teachers with time for planning and collaboration. Each school began by assessing their particular needs and identifying the resources available to them. Teachers played a key role in developing the school schedule. And finally, school leadership developed mechanisms for ensuring non-instructional time was used effectively.

I've done planning time in big schools and small schools and it can be done if you sit down and look at the schedule and have a conversation with the teachers about how to create the plan for the schedule.
—Principal

Druid Hills Elementary in Charlotte faced challenges created by half-time specials teachers and district mandated times for core content area instruction. To create 70 minutes of planning time per day for every grade level, the school employed lunchroom monitors to provide duty-free lunch, allowing grade level teachers to eat together. That duty-free lunch period was backed by the state mandated physical activity period and specials classes. In addition to the traditional special classes of PE, Art, and Music, the school created an Accelerated Reader special where a tutor provided structured time to read and conference with students, freeing up teachers to plan individually and with colleagues.

Steps to Creating a School Schedule that Includes Sufficient Non-instructional Time

- **Assess needs and available resources.** The nine schools varied in their needs and access to resources. Yet, a common theme emerged—the desire for large blocks of uninterrupted time. To create those blocks of time, the schools developed a variety of solutions, but all began by identifying teachers' most pressing time needs and taking inventory of the time and personnel available during the instructional day.

Teachers really want large uninterrupted blocks of time, some sanity in their schedule so they are not pulled in so many different directions, and planning time every day. —Principal

For schools with full time specials teachers, a common approach to creating large blocks of time was to provide a duty-free lunch backed by the physical activity period and specials

classes. Schools with half time specials teachers needed to be more creative. These schools could not rely solely on specials teachers to provide non-instructional time and duty-free lunch for teachers. They used administrators, teacher assistants, lunchroom monitors, and community members. Teacher assistants were used primarily to cover the lunch period and the physical activity.

First Flight Elementary in Dare County approached the creation of the school schedule from the perspective of protecting instructional time, rather creating non-instructional time. After ensuring that instructional time was protected, teachers were left with one hour of planning time per day and a duty-free lunch period. Teacher assistants, as well as the principal and assistant principal, cover lunch. Teachers decided when the teacher assistants would have 30 minutes of planning time.

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- **Involve teachers in developing the school schedule.** The principals recognized teachers as the most qualified individuals to inform the development of the school schedule. For some schools, the School Improvement Team (SIT) was the primary mechanism for giving teachers a voice in the process of creating non-instructional time. Principals indicated that the SITs have helped to define and set expectations for the amount of planning time available to teachers, including the amount of collaborative time available.

The key is listening to teachers and having them bring plans forward. They will come up with the best plans when you have that kind of open dialogue. —Principal

At South Topsail Elementary in Pender County, teachers are encouraged to attend School Improvement Team meetings and present their ideas for improving the school. The current school schedule was presented at an 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.

- **Develop mechanisms to ensure non-instructional time is used effectively.** The principals stressed the importance of ensuring quality with non-instructional time available. They believed that quality time is used to improve instruction and support student learning. Yet, they also described the challenge of bringing some structure and accountability to planning time without stifling the potential for innovative and authentic meeting time. Principals want a degree of knowledge about how teachers are using their non-instructional time, but also wish to respect and honor the professionalism of teachers.

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At Bugg Elementary in Wake County, the quality of planning time became a more important issue for teachers than the amount of planning time available. As the principal explained, “We have a lot of planning time because of available specialists, but the question we asked is whether we were using this planning time effectively.” To address this issue, teachers met as groups to talk about how they were using their non-instructional time. The instructional resource teacher and the principal attended these meetings as well. In addition, Specialists have their own planning time and they meet with every grade level to plan how to integrate curriculum into specials classes.

The time that it takes to plan effective instruction matters most ... The planning piece is essential. It has to happen, and it has to happen in a collaborative sense. —Principal

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Districts should recognize the unique needs of individual schools and create mechanisms for sharing strategies for effective use of time, creating unique planning time solutions, and promoting these ideas for schools to consider adapting to their own context.

North Carolina House Bill 1151 brings much-needed attention to the issue of non-instructional time by requiring schools to develop plans for providing duty-free instructional planning time and duty-free lunch periods for every teacher.

- **Allow for flexibility and foster innovation in scheduling and planning time.** Schools within the same district vary in the availability of resources, access to specialists, student learning needs, community support, teacher experience and transportation schedules. Under these diverse circumstances, defining a rigid system for scheduling and planning time to apply equally proves counterproductive. Instead, districts should recognize the unique needs of individual schools and create mechanisms for sharing strategies for effective use of time, creating unique planning time solutions, and promoting these ideas for schools to consider adapting to their own context.
- **Encourage principal to principal discussions that allow for open dialogue and sharing of ideas and experiences.** While it may not be feasible to adopt the exact strategies used in another school, there is no need to completely reinvent the wheel. Strategies that work in one school could be modified to fit another school's particular needs and resources. Just like teachers, principals benefit from the knowledge and experience of their peers.
- **Provide guidance on expectations for the use of planning time** without becoming overly prescriptive. Guidance with flexibility will foster customized solutions for planning challenges facing individual schools. To the greatest extent possible, districts should also consider implementing a reporting tool for schools to describe how educators are creating and using planning time to improve student learning.
- **Build in rewards for non-instructional time.** Research shows that the most effective professional development is student-centered, school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching. This kind of professional development takes place daily in schools through the collaborative work of coaches, mentors, instructional specialists, grade level teams and other teachers are not considered formal professional development where teachers receive credit for their participation. Teachers should receive credit for participating in collaborative non-instructional activities where they can demonstrate a change in teaching practice and its impact on student learning.
- **Prioritize planning in the allocation of resources.** In allocating resources, districts need to consider not only the instructional needs of schools, but the non-instructional time needs of teachers. Looking at employing paraprofessionals, specialists and the strategic use of qualified substitutes and volunteers should occur.

In North Carolina, House Bill 1151 brings much-needed attention to the issue of non-instructional time by requiring schools to develop plans for providing duty-free instructional planning time and duty-free lunch periods for every teacher. The experiences of these nine elementary schools indicate that finding sufficient non-instructional time is difficult, but can be done in any school setting where administrators and educators are committed to leveraging all available resources, engaging educators in reviewing scheduling needs, promoting flexibility and innovation in scheduling and creating mechanisms to ensure that time is used effectively.

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