

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative

Summary of Findings



While the primary intent of the Teacher Working Conditions Initiative remains to inform school level reform by providing specific data for communities to understand their schools' unique working condition challenges, an analysis of the statewide findings also provides broad insights valuable for policymakers and stakeholders in making education decisions.

In considering these six primary findings from the initiative, policymakers and stakeholders across the state can develop a more complete understanding of how teacher working conditions affect student achievement and teacher retention; how teachers' perceptions of working conditions relate to realities in schools; how teachers and principals view the same working conditions differently; how divergent teacher groups view working conditions similarly and how a single working condition has a "ripple effect" on conditions throughout a school.

The summary provided below presents a brief overview of each of the six primary findings from the report and their implications for the state, for a more complete documentation of findings and explanation of the statistical analyses, visit the full report at: www.teachingquality.org/2004_twc_report.htm

FINDING ONE: TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS ARE IMPORTANT PREDICTORS OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

SECTQ analyzed the Teacher Working Conditions Survey results and other critical variables against various measures of student achievement, such as Adequate Yearly Progress status under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, student achievement growth and ABC school designation status. The following section summarizes the findings from the statistical analysis relative to the impact of teacher working conditions on student achievement after controlling for key variables.

Teacher Working Conditions and AYP Status

- Survey results for *professional development* were a significant predictor of AYP status for North Carolina schools. For every one point increase in satisfaction with professional development on the survey, schools are four times more likely to achieve AYP.
- For every one point increase on the survey in all schools on the *facilities and resources* domain average, schools were three times more likely to achieve AYP.
- *Leadership* was the single greatest predictor of AYP status at the middle school level, more so than school size and teacher retention. For every one point increase on the Working Conditions Survey results in the area of leadership, middle schools were 6.7 times more likely to achieve AYP.

ABC Test Student Performance: Growth Status

- *Professional development* was by far the greatest predictor of ABC status at the middle school level, more so than school size, teacher retention or AYP status. Middle schools were 12.4 times more likely to move up one growth expectation category—either move from not met to meet, or from meet to exceed—for every one point increase in the professional development domain average.

"Armed with this data, North Carolina will better meet the needs of teachers, and in turn, our students, because teacher working conditions are student learning conditions."

—Governor Mike Easley

SECTQ analyzed the Teacher Working Conditions Survey results and other critical variables against various measures of student achievement, such as Adequate Yearly Progress status student achievement growth and ABC school designation status.

Professional development, facilities and resources, and leadership were all significant predictors of student achievement.

ABC Test Student Performance: School Designation Status

- *Professional development* matters greatly as to whether students achieve. For every one point increase on the Working Conditions Survey, schools were 10 times more likely to be rated in one of the top school designation categories (School of Distinction, School of Excellence, or Honor School of Excellence, meaning that at least 80 percent of students perform at or above grade level and growth expectations were met or exceeded).
- *Leadership* was a powerful predictor of whether or not a school had high student achievement at the high school level. High schools were 48 times more likely to be included in one of the top three performance designations for every one point increase on the leadership domain average.
- *Facilities and resources* are also significant and meaningful predictors of student achievement in North Carolina schools. Schools were three times more likely to be in one of the top designation categories for every point increase on the survey.

The overall evidence from the analysis of the impact of teacher working conditions on student achievement provides compelling evidence that working conditions are significant predictors of student achievement.

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“If I am allowed to utilize my teaching expertise—to draw from what I know will engage and stimulate my students—then students will achieve at levels not one could dream of. If I am hampered, then I can’t do what I do best.”

—Member, Teacher Leaders Network in a discussion of teacher working conditions

FINDING TWO: TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO TEACHER RETENTION

Teachers indicated that working in a collegial atmosphere (34 percent) led by a principal with a strong instructional emphasis (27 percent) mattered most in teachers decisions about whether or not to stay in the school in which they work. Teachers value school settings where they are not isolated, working together with leadership that supports their efforts.

As one accomplished teacher described during an online conversation about teacher working conditions, “My darkest hours of teaching were when I had no one else to talk to about student achievement and effective instruction. It was in those days I made covert plans to find somewhere else to teach.”

The working conditions survey indicated significant connections between most working conditions and teacher retention (as was the case with student achievement, the connection between time and teacher retention is tenuous).

The connections between teacher retention and other working conditions domains were statistically significant, albeit at lower levels than expected, especially when compared to other critical factors. Greater agreement (higher satisfaction levels) with the *empowerment* questions on the survey had a significant impact on teacher retention at the high school level. A significant connection between retention and *professional development* was also documented. *Professional development* was also found to exert a significant effect on teacher retention at the elementary

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level. School designation based on ABC test results, school size, and student poverty all contribute to teacher retention.

FINDING THREE: PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING CONDITIONS ARE REFLECTIVE OF ACTUAL SCHOOL CONDITIONS

Questions on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey are designed to capture educators’ perceptions of working conditions in their school. Most questions assess how strongly educators agree with different statements that align with the state’s working conditions standards. Fortunately, these perceptions appear to be well grounded in the realities of schools. So while this may be an “opinion survey,” it can provide great insight into the actual design and conditions in a school. Consider the following:

- The relationship between teachers’ perception of time and the amount of planning time provided are significantly related. Teachers receiving more planning time had more positive views of working conditions. Conversely, those who spent more time outside of school on school-related activities were more likely to feel negative about time.
- Teachers who strongly disagreed that they have sufficient access to reliable communications technology or instructional supplies were much more likely to be negative overall about their facilities and resources.
- Teachers agreeing strongly that they had adequate and appropriate time for professional development had much higher average ratings on the professional development domain. Teachers that indicated they determine the content of their professional development had higher ratings in the areas of professional development, leadership and empowerment.
- Teachers who voted for members of the School Improvement Team had better perceptions of working conditions, particularly empowerment and leadership. Teachers who played a role in the selection of members also indicated that the School Improvement Team was a more effective aspect of leadership in the school.

Teacher perception of working conditions expressed on the survey appear to be well grounded in the reality of schools.

FINDING FOUR: LEADERSHIP IS CRITICAL TO IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS, BUT PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS PERCEIVE THESE CONDITIONS VERY DIFFERENTLY

As was the case in 2002, teachers and principals view the same working conditions with considerable differences. Responses on every survey question were significantly different between the two groups of educators. Principals were more positive about working conditions in every area, particularly about the amount of time teachers have and how empowered they are to make decisions on education issues.

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Teacher Versus Principal Perception of Working Conditions Issues

Working Condition Domain or Question	Teacher Average	Principal Average
Q. 3: Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students	2.72	3.80
Q. 10: The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about the use of time in my school	3.18	4.38
Q. 40: Teachers are centrally involved in decision making about important education issues	3.28	4.38
Q. 57: Teachers in my school have time to plan with their colleagues during the school day	2.94	4.14
Q. 71: Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn	4.02	4.54

All responses statistically significantly different at the .01 level (two-tailed test). Responses on a one -to-five scale of agreement with one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree

If many school and district leaders do not perceive the full extent of issues related to working conditions, it should not be surprising that there has been little impetus to improve them.

Some disparity in perceptions between school leaders and teachers on these measures might be expected, as would be the case with most business or other organizational surveys regarding working conditions. However, the consistency and the degree to which these discrepancies between school leaders and teachers occur across questions and domains on the survey are both noteworthy. The data indicate that many teachers have critical concerns about their time and decision making authority that are oftentimes unrecognized by school leaders.

FINDING FIVE: TEACHERS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE, VIEW WORKING CONDITIONS SIMILARLY

Teacher responses to the Working Conditions Survey were remarkably similar. Race, gender, highest degree earned, means of preparation (lateral entry versus traditional preparation) and National Board Certification status do not appear to affect teacher perceptions of any working conditions domain.

Teacher background and experience also did not affect overall satisfaction with their school or the aspects of working conditions they believed to be most important in retaining teachers and improving student learning.

While background does not appear to influence teacher's perceptions of their working conditions, the school level in which they teach does. Elementary teachers had more positive perceptions of working conditions than secondary teachers, particularly those at the high school level.

FINDING SIX: MANY ASPECTS OF WORKING CONDITIONS HAVE "RIPPLE EFFECTS"

All working conditions are all positively and significantly correlated with each other, meaning schools are more likely to have teachers who feel either positive or negative overall about working conditions and less likely to have teachers feel positive or negative about a single working condition without effecting their perception of other conditions in the school. Consider the following:

- Leadership and professional development are strongly correlated. Many of the critical issues within the professional development area involve principals acting as strong instructional leaders, prioritizing, providing resources and allowing teachers to direct their own learning.
- Leadership and empowerment are also closely related. Teachers who felt empowered to make decisions about their classroom and school work have positive views of their school leader.

This interconnectedness could pose challenges to schools looking to focus on particular working conditions areas in hopes of making improvements. However, the correlations also indicate that improving one area could have a "ripple" effect on others and cause teacher's overall satisfaction with their school climate to increase and thereby improve student learning.

The findings from this report support the importance of identifying and discussing teacher working conditions. Significant and compelling connections between working conditions and student achievement were documented. Ensuring a qualified teacher for every student is not enough to close the achievement gap. Teachers must have the resources and supports they need to serve all students well, and without comprehensive and sustained efforts to improve teacher working conditions much of the state's notable school reform efforts could go unfulfilled.

Prepared by the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality for Governor Mike Easley

Working conditions are all positively and significantly correlated with each other. Changing one area could have a "ripple" effect on other working conditions and influence teachers' overall satisfaction with school climate.