



## Time: The Understudied X Factor That Stalls Ed Policy Reforms



Ms. Smith is a dedicated and experienced teacher at a diverse suburban school where her second-grade students arrive with a wide range of backgrounds and skills. She is doing her best to implement her state's new approach to literacy instruction because she is optimistic that it will help her students become better readers, but one thing keeps getting in the way:

Time.

Although she spent part of her summer break in mandatory training, the implementation demands keep piling up, including one-on-one student screenings that span multiple instructional days, weekly after-school meetings with the school's literacy coach that require her to spend additional money on childcare for her own children, and the need to cut into family time by working after-hours to modify the new curricula to meet her students' needs.

Ms. Smith is not real. But her problems are, according to [On the Clock](#):

*The Centrality of Time in Teacher Work*, a new [Albert Shanker Institute](#) report by NEPC Fellow [Jack Schneider](#), along with [Breanne Lucy](#) and [Babatunde Alford](#) of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, [Ashley Carey](#) of Sacred Heart University, [Ayana Bass](#) of Roger Williams University, and [Nathan Jones](#) of Boston University. The researchers created Smith's hypothetical persona to illustrate how "how even committed, skilled teachers face impossible constraints when policies add significant responsibilities without restructuring existing time demands."

These time demands are higher for teachers in the United States than they are for their counterparts in other comparable (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations: Only teachers in Chile work more hours. American teachers also work 100 more hours per year than the average American non-teacher, the report notes, drawing on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The authors also point to research suggesting "that the boundaries between work and personal life are more blurred for educators than for employees in similar professions." For instance, they are more likely to work evenings and weekends.

Discussing the report on the "[Have You Heard](#)" podcast, which Schneider co-hosts with Jennifer Berkshire, the authors are joined by some of the current and former teachers who participated in the study. They explain that the unusually high demands on American teachers' time help explain why so many education policy reforms in this country fall short of their intended goals.

"Without sufficient time to learn new practices, implement them with fidelity, and collaborate with colleagues, even well-intentioned policies can lead to superficial compliance, temporary transformation, or complete failure," the authors write. "New curricula, assessments, professional development, and data management requirements accumulate without corresponding adjustments to the school day or teacher workload, creating tension between teachers' professional aspirations and personal well-being."

One result is reform efforts that can't be implemented as intended. American teachers' high workloads also help to explain the recent declines in teacher satisfaction and in the number of people pursuing the

profession.

In response to this reality, the report proposes a framework that calls for new education policies to directly account for and address temporary or permanent increases in teacher workload caused by reforms. For example, the literacy policy the hypothetical Ms. Smith implemented could have included resources to hire employees to execute the new (required) one-on-one student assessments, rather than assuming the classroom teacher would conduct them on her own. Ms. Smith could have received additional coaching on the new curriculum in real time as she instructed students in her classroom, rather than during after-school meetings that lengthened her workday and increased her childcare expenses.

“Only by attending explicitly to time will education reform become as feasible and as humane as it needs to be in order to work,” the report concludes.

### NEPC Resources on Education Policy and Policymaking

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