



Mass TeLLS

Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey

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Educators offer views on how to improve schools

Three out of four Massachusetts educators believe that their schools are good places to work and learn, according to a statewide survey that is being released today. However, high percentages of educators express concerns about the teaching and learning conditions in their schools, and those concerns are more pronounced in low-income urban schools than in suburban and rural communities.

The Massachusetts Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (Mass TeLLS) was conducted by the New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz and was sponsored by a coalition of education associations, policy organizations, civic groups and the Commonwealth. More than 40,000 educators – both teachers and administrators – took the survey early last year. That is about half the total number of educators in the Commonwealth.

“Support for teachers is one of the four pillars of the Readiness Project because we all recognize that we need excellent and empowered individuals in classrooms if our students are to succeed,” said Governor Deval Patrick. “I am firmly committed to engaging our many talented teachers in the conversation about improving our public education system in Massachusetts and am pleased to receive this survey.”

The survey asked participants for their views on a wide range of issues, including whether educators are meaningfully involved in making decisions, the quality of professional development offered, whether there is enough time to teach the required curriculum and what external factors most influence student achievement. Findings were analyzed in relation to

MCAS scores, how long an educator has been teaching, student poverty levels and other indicators.

Staff in any school in which 40 percent or more of the educators took the anonymous survey received access to their school's results last May and were encouraged to use the findings to address problems that were identified or to reinforce successful practices.

The purpose of the survey, which was administered in five other states last year, is to improve practices at the school and district levels as well as to inform state education policies. Access to the data was restricted to affected educators until today to give them time to analyze the results and incorporate the findings into their school improvement plans. Schools and districts were offered training in how to interpret the results and work internally to address problems. Educators from 42 districts participated in the training.

Eric Hirsch of the NTC authored the final report, which can be found at www.masstells.org, along with school and district results.

Among the positive findings:

- Seventy-seven percent of educators believe their schools are good places to work and learn, and 83 percent plan to remain at their current schools.
- Nine out of 10 (90 percent of teachers; 93 percent of administrators) report that the faculty is committed to helping every student learn, and even more (94 and 95 percent, respectively) believe that the curriculum taught is aligned to the state's Curriculum Frameworks.

Challenges identified include:

- Only half of all educators (46 percent) say they are meaningfully engaged in decision-making in their schools and just over half (55 percent) say they are recognized as educational experts.
- Only 4 out of 10 (39 percent) believe they have enough instructional time to meet students' needs. Among principals, only 3 out of 10 feel that they have enough time to be instructional leaders in their schools.
- Elementary teachers in particular (45 percent) report they do not have enough non-instructional time during the week to plan lessons and collaborate with their peers. Despite this concern, elementary teachers were more positive overall about conditions in their schools than secondary teachers.
- Only half (49 percent) believe their schools are environmentally healthy and clean.
- Two out of three believe that the achievement of their students is negatively affected by excessive absenteeism and tardiness. This finding is more pronounced in high-poverty schools, where tardiness (83 percent) and absenteeism (85 percent) are cited as significant impediments to learning. Even in the most

affluent quartile of schools, however, half report similar concerns.

Consistent with findings in other states, Hirsch said, there is a direct correlation between educators' positive perceptions about the teaching and learning conditions in their schools and student performance. The NTC analyzed student MCAS results in light of the TeLLS findings and found that, while student poverty and other external factors are the greatest predictors of student achievement, other factors over which governments and districts have some control do make a difference. Teachers' workload was especially important at the secondary level, while factors related to school leadership, professional development and resources had a significant impact on elementary student achievement.

Not surprisingly, the study found that teaching conditions have a big impact on teacher retention. For example, only one in five (20 percent) of the teachers who said they want to move to another school report that there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their schools, compared to two-thirds (65 percent) of those who plan to stay.

Report recommendations include:

- Ensuring that teaching conditions are part of future efforts to recruit and retain qualified teachers. Improved teaching conditions were viewed as just as important as financial incentives in attracting teachers to hard-to-staff schools.
- Providing school leaders and other staff with more support and professional development to help them work collaboratively to establish positive conditions in their schools.
- Closing the teaching conditions gap by targeting resources to high-poverty schools and reaching out to community stakeholders to improve student readiness for schools, including reducing absenteeism and tardiness.
- Continuing to survey educators with TeLLS or other survey instruments to learn their views on how to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

Releasing the final TeLLS report were the following coalition members: Massachusetts Teachers Association, American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, National Education Association, Massachusetts Association of School Committees, Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, Massachusetts Elementary School Principals Association, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, The Boston Foundation and Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts supported the project with funding for training in use of TeLLS data for school and district improvement efforts.

Comments on the TeLLS from some of the coalition members:

Maura Banta of IBM represented the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education on the coalition. She is currently chair of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

“I have been doing these kinds of surveys for 35 years at IBM. It is very important to get feedback from employees and to give serious consideration to their opinions. It is critical that schools and districts solicit the same kind of feedback and to use the results in developing action plans for the future.”

Paul Grogan, president and chief executive officer of The Boston Foundation

“The Boston Foundation is very pleased to have supported this important opportunity to hear directly from thousands of teachers and administrators across the Commonwealth about the work they do, the conditions under which they do it and the key challenges they face, all in an effort to help improve conditions for one of our most valuable resources – the teaching profession.”

Anne Wass, president, Massachusetts Teachers Association

“About 10 years ago we came up with a slogan: ‘If you want to know how to make schools work better, ask a teacher.’ We believe that just as strongly today, which is why the MTA became actively involved in promoting TeLLS. Teachers and administrators know what they need to help their students succeed. It is very important to ask them for their views so that we can continually improve the quality of our schools.”