

North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey Brief: Teacher Working Conditions Are Student Learning Conditions

Eric Hirsch, *New Teacher Center* with
Keri Church, *LEARN NC*

Since 2001, the Office of the Governor, the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission and the North Carolina State Board of Education have made a sustained commitment to listening to educators and reforming schools to create the working conditions necessary for student and teacher success.

In 2008, 104,249 educators responded to the Teacher Working Conditions Survey (87 percent), the highest proportion since the advent of the survey in 2002. Every traditional public school and school district in the state of North Carolina reached the minimum response rate (40 percent) necessary to have valid data, providing information needed to gauge the successes and areas of concerns in their own school community. The data was made available in May 2008 at www.ncteachingconditions.org.

With four iterations of the survey completed, analyses have been consistent and clear. The conditions teachers face in schools and classrooms are essential elements of student achievement. Analyses from 2004 and 2006 demonstrate that (Hirsch and Emerick, 2007; Hirsch, 2005):

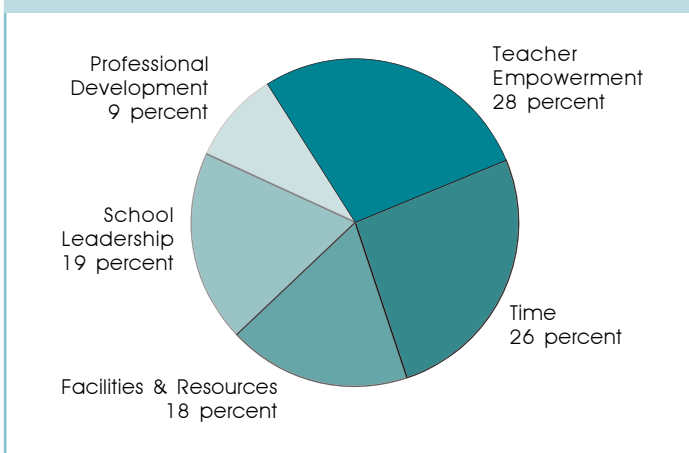
- Providing teachers with sufficient instructional materials that they can select and use in devising their own teaching techniques is significantly related to school level student achievement.
- Leadership is essential. School leaders that can empower faculty, create safe school environments, and develop supportive, trusting climates are more likely to be successful in promoting student learning.

With the 2008 survey data, the New Teacher Center analyzed the relationship between survey responses aggregated to the school-level and student performance as measured by the performance composite (the percentage of students at or above achievement level III/proficient) and whether or not schools met student learning growth targets set by the state. Supporting statistical documentation on the data utilized, survey questions included in the working conditions areas examined (leadership, decision making, professional development, time and facilities and resources) and statistical models developed are available in the research section of www.ncteachingconditions.org.

Findings

On the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, teachers reported that empowerment issues—role in decision making, clarity and effectiveness of decision making processes, etc.—and time are the conditions most critical to promoting student learning (Figure 1). In 2008, teacher empowerment was the working condition teachers indicated as most essential to student learning cited (28 percent), compared to 2006 when time was reported most frequently (Hirsch and Emerick, 2007). Professional development was cited by only about one out of ten teachers.

FIGURE 1. TEACHING CONDITION PERCEIVED AS BEING MOST IMPORTANT IN PROMOTING STUDENT LEARNING



In examining the correlations between working conditions and student achievement, Decision Making, Leadership, Time, and Facilities and Resources are significantly correlated with higher school level achievement for elementary, middle and high schools (Table 1). The connections appear to be strongest in the areas of Decisions Making and Facilities and

Resources and weakest in the areas of Time and Professional Development.

- Student characteristics, in particular poverty, are the strongest correlates with student achievement at all levels.
- Higher teacher turnover and the percentage of teachers on lateral entry licenses are correlated with lower student achievement as measured by the Performance Composite.

Individual survey item analyses help to better identify specific issues within the working conditions areas where educators have differing perspectives across schools based student performance levels. Schools were separated into quartiles based on the Performance Composite and percentage agreement for all questions was analyzed. Elementary level analyses are presented (Table 2).

Eight out of ten educators (78 percent) at the highest-performing elementary schools report that there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their school compared to six out of ten in the lowest-performing schools (59 percent). Teachers in high-performing schools at all levels were significantly more likely to report working in safe, trusting environments with supportive, effective school leadership and strong School Improvement Teams. Almost nine in ten educators (86 percent) at the highest-performing schools agreed their school is a good place to work and learn compared to two-thirds (66 percent) in the lowest performing.

There were few differences across performance quartiles on several questions related to professional development.

Approximately two-thirds of teachers in the highest- and lowest-performing schools agree that professional development provided them with new instructional strategies and led to increased student learning. Professional development resources, time and followup is similar across elementary schools regardless of performance level.

To better understand the connections between working conditions and student achievement, statistical models were created for elementary, middle and high schools. This modeling moves beyond correlations by controlling for various factors to better determine whether there is a direct relationship between particular working conditions in light of the multitude of factors that influence student learning.

Elementary Level Student Performance

The statistical model for elementary performance was robust, explaining 76 percent of the variance in school

level achievement. Leadership, Facilities and Resources, and Professional Development had a statistically significant connection to student achievement.

- Responses to the battery of questions comprising the Leadership Factor—including issues of trust and support—exerted roughly the same influence on the Performance Composite as the proportion of teachers on lateral entry licenses. Leadership was about twice as strong an influence on school performance as the teacher turnover rate.
- At the elementary (and middle school level), higher performing schools were less likely to note positive conditions for Professional Development. This same connection was noted in 2006 (Hirsch and Emerick, 2007) and has been found in other states as well. As many questions in the Professional Development Factor focus on the amount of funding and resources

TABLE 1. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN WORKING CONDITIONS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT BY LEVEL

Influences on Student Learning	Performance Composite		
	<i>Elementary Schools</i>	<i>Middle Schools</i>	<i>High Schools</i>
Leadership	.340*	.230*	.298*
Professional Development	.079*	.087	.246*
Time	.141*	.159*	.199*
Decision Making	.347*	.301*	.380*
Facilities and Resources	.330*	.354*	.398*
Percentage of Lateral Entry Teachers	-.305*	-.531*	-.373*
Student Teacher Ratio	.050	.329*	.292*
Average Daily Membership	.236*	.299*	.155*
Teacher Turnover Rate	-.320*	-.349**	-.248*
Percentage of Limited English Proficient Students	-.277*	-.341*	-.250*
Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	-.808*	-.833*	-.490*

Note: Data are correlation coefficients. The closer to 1.0 or -1.0, the stronger the connection between variables. In social sciences, a 0.3 is generally accepted as a meaningful connection.
* Significant at the p < .01 level (two-tailed)

available for professional development, poorer and lower-performing schools, often the beneficiaries of greater federal (Title I) and state investments, are more positive about the frequency and funding of opportunities for support.

- For every one-point increase in the school leadership factor average, elementary schools were 85 percent more likely to exceed growth expectations. Schools were 82 percent more likely to exceed growth expectations for every one point increase in school factor averages in the area of time (collaboration, planning, sufficient class size, etc.).
- While working conditions areas significantly influence achievement, student background had the strongest

impact on school performance. Poverty was five times as predictive of elementary student performance as Leadership and was almost three times more influential than any other variable included in the model.

The proportion of minority and Limited English proficient students, percentage of minority educators, and reported acts of violence by students were also statistically significant in explaining elementary performance in addition to the variables discussed above.

Middle School Performance

The statistical model for middle school performance explained 82 percent of the variance in school level achievement. Leadership, Facilities and Resources, and

TABLE 2. TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEY QUESTIONS BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PERFORMANCE QUARTILE

North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Questions				
	<i>Quartile I (Lowest Performing)</i>	<i>Quartile II</i>	<i>Quartile III</i>	<i>Quartile IV (Highest Performing)</i>
Overall my school is a good place to work and learn	66%	79%	81%	86%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	59%	69%	70%	78%
The school leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct	58%	66%	69%	76%
The school leadership support teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom	64%	72%	76%	82%
The School Improvement Team provides effective leadership at this school	58%	67%	68%	75%
The faculty and staff have a shared vision	67%	75%	77%	83%
The school leadership shields teachers from disruptions, allowing teachers to focus on educating students	61%	69%	71%	77%
The school leadership consistently supports teachers	65%	73%	75%	81%
In this school we take steps to solve problems	63%	70%	72%	78%
Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective	56%	65%	66%	71%

Note: Items are ordered based on the greatest disparity between Quartile I (low performing) and Quartile IV (high performing) schools.

Professional Development significantly affect student performance.

- Facilities and resources had the strongest influence of the working conditions variables for middle schools, affecting school level achievement about as much or more than any student, school or teacher characteristic except poverty. Facilities and Resources had three times the influence on achievement as the percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, reported acts of student violence, and teacher turnover. A five percent increase in the Performance Composite could be estimated for every one-point difference in the Facilities and Resources Factor mean score on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey.
- Leadership had twice as strong an influence on performance as the proportion of teachers with advanced degrees and teacher turnover.
- For every one-point increase in the Facilities and Resources Factor average, middle schools were 98 percent more likely to exceed growth expectations. Middle schools with higher teacher turnover, higher class sizes and higher-poverty students were less likely to exceed growth expectations.

High School Performance

The statistical model for high school performance explained 66 percent of the variance in school level achievement. Leadership, Facilities and Resources, and Time were statistically significant in explaining high school student performance.

- Time exerted the strongest influence of the working conditions areas on high school achievement, similar to the impact on the school-wide Performance Composite as the proportion of teachers on lateral entry licenses and reported acts of student violence.
- Leadership and Facilities and Resources were statistically significant in explaining whether schools met growth expectations. For every one-point increase in the Facilities and Resources Factor average, high schools were 97 percent more likely to exceed growth expectations. High schools were 92 percent more likely to exceed growth expectations for every one-point increase in the Leadership Factor average.

The percentage of minority students, the percentage of students in poverty, school size (larger schools had higher performance levels) and student teacher ratio were also statistically significant in explaining student performance.

Conclusion

Statistical models demonstrate that the presence of supportive school leadership and sufficient facilities and resources are significant factors in explaining student achievement at all school levels. Positive working conditions, where educators are supported and empowered, are essential to creating schools where teachers and administrators want to work and students learn.

References

Hirsch, E. and Emerick S. with K. Church and E. Fuller (2007). *Teacher Working Conditions are Student Learning Conditions: A Report on the 2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey*. Hillsborough, N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality.

Hirsch, E. (2005). *Teacher Working Conditions are Student Learning Conditions: A Report to Governor Mike Easley on the 2004 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Southeast Center for Teaching Quality.

About The New Teacher Center

The New Teacher Center (NTC) was established in 1998 as a national resource focused on teacher and administrator induction. NTC implements and promotes induction best practices through a variety of innovative professional development opportunities and materials that assist educators and policy makers in supporting the next generation of education professionals. Using an integrated, collaborative approach, NTC strives to support essential research, well-informed policy, and thoughtful practice that encourage teacher development from pre-service throughout the career of a teacher.

New Teacher Center

Improving Teaching and Learning in America's Schools



725 Front Street, Suite 400, Santa Cruz, CA 95060
831-459-4323 | Fax: 831-459-3822 | info@newteachercenter.org
www.newteachercenter.org

