

Workplace Conditions

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This brief describes workplace conditions in “learning centered” schools, where practices are consistent with recent research knowledge about learning and its contexts. Its purpose is to support fundamental, long-term change by offering a vision of best practice for educators to consider, discuss, and adapt to their circumstances.

Having a good teacher is a key to student success. Supportive school workplace conditions can enhance teacher quality, enable teachers to teach more effectively, and improve retention. Research indicates that

- The teacher characteristics associated with quality are not fixed and static but rather malleable and dynamic. Teacher quality grows within a rich professional context.
- Effective teaching can be enabled or constrained by the school workplace and the supports it offers (or fails to offer).
- Recruitment and retention are both important in maintaining an effective teaching staff. Because teachers often cite poor working conditions as a reason for leaving, workplace improvements can promote retention.

Supportive Working Conditions

Research on teacher quality, effective teaching, and teacher retention all point to a set of workplace conditions that can facilitate these goals. Therefore, improving workplace conditions is

an important strategy for school success. The workplace conditions that matter are discussed below and summarized in Table 1.

Appropriate and Fair Teaching Assignments

Teachers need reasonable teaching loads and class sizes in order to teach most effectively. This commonsense benchmark is essential to a teacher’s success and satisfaction. Teachers are prepared and licensed to teach at particular grade levels or in specific fields, but too often they are assigned outside these areas or have unworkable split assignments.

Student learning is limited when teachers do not have appropriate and fair teaching assignments. Teachers experience their jobs as stressful and unrewarding and are more likely to leave. To exemplify this benchmark, many schools and school systems need to address the following kinds of problems.

Out-of-Field Teaching. Large numbers of teachers, especially new teachers, are routinely assigned to teach outside their area of expertise

The brief is based on an NEA Research working paper, “The Workplace Matters: Teacher Quality, Retention, and Effectiveness,” by Susan Moore Johnson (2006). The working paper synthesizes research from a variety of fields to develop a set of benchmarks for best practice focusing on school-level workplace conditions. It includes the evidence and citations for the ideas summarized in this brief. The full paper can be ordered by mail or online from the NEA:

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and field of license. About 12 percent of elementary teachers lack an appropriate academic degree. The problem is worse in high schools, where it varies by field. For example, one-third of math teachers and one-fifth of science and social studies teachers lack a major or minor in their assigned subject.

Split Assignments. Teachers are sometimes required to teach in different subjects, grades, classrooms, or schools. Sometimes, part of their assignment is out of field. They may have to work from carts that they wheel from room to room. They lack ready access to bookshelves, reference materials, filing cabinets, and equipment.

Teaching Load. The number of different courses that teachers must juggle, even when they are all within their field of expertise, can affect their capacity to teach effectively and their satisfaction with teaching. The average teaching load for secondary school teachers in the United States is five classes a day with two different subjects or preparations. More excessive loads become increasingly problematic.

Class Size. Teachers prefer classes that allow them to know and work with individual students. Over time, class-size ratios have been steadily declining. Research is beginning to show that smaller class sizes benefit students as well as teachers. A controlled experiment in Tennessee showed long-lasting, positive effects on student achievement in reading and math in classes of 13 to 17 (compared with 22 to 26). Research in Wisconsin found similar results. It emphasized that although small classes benefit all students, the benefits may be greatest for minority students or students attending inner-city schools. Moreover, the positive benefits of being in small classes for three to four years in the early grades continued after students returned to larger classes in the upper grades.

Collaborative Work with Colleagues

Although the image of individual teachers working in isolation has long been the norm, more and more teachers today value the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues. Collaborative work among teachers can contribute to teacher satisfaction and increased

student achievement. Teachers are more likely to work collaboratively in successful schools than in unsuccessful schools. In strong professional communities, teachers help and support each other, develop innovative approaches to instruction, and accept collective responsibility for student achievement. Despite its benefits, collegial interaction is unlikely to occur unless the workplace culture and structure promote it. Time allowances and alignment of preparation periods for teachers who need to work together can facilitate professional community.

Extra Support for New Teachers

In response to the influx of new teachers in recent years, many schools and districts are trying to do better than the “sink or swim” induction teachers have typically experienced. They have instituted mentoring or more comprehensive induction programs designed to provide extra support for new teachers.

Mentoring programs often pair experienced and new teachers. These vary widely from an informal buddy arrangement to an intense, supervisory one. Mentoring can have a positive effect on new teacher job satisfaction and retention, provided the mentor is trained, teaches in the same field as the novice, and has time allocated for class observations and debriefing. Interaction among teachers of all experience levels in a school also contributes to new-teacher satisfaction.

More extensive induction programs appear to provide even better support. In one study, teachers who received “basic induction” (mentoring and supportive administrator communication) had a turnover probability of 39 percent, but teachers who received bundles of seven induction components (the former plus collaboration/planning time, seminars, teacher networks, an aide, and a reduced course load) had only an 18 percent probability of turnover. Comprehensive programs are more effective in retaining teachers.

Support for Working with Students

Students and teachers co-produce results. Success in learning and student achievement depends on the will, cooperation, and skill of both. Surveys in the past two decades indicate that teachers see



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students as changed in nearly every respect predictive of academic success—social class, family support, consistent attendance, attention to schoolwork, and fluency in English. Table 1 compares typical workplace conditions with conceptual benchmarks for “best practices” that would be consistent with current research.

However, successful schools do not dwell on student deficits. Instead, they build systems of

support that enable teachers and students to overcome challenges. Effective teacher professional communities foster the view among teachers that all students can meet high standards, provide moral support for teachers, and help them explore ways to improve practice. In many schools, teachers work in teams with special education consultants, bilingual teachers or aides, social workers, and counselors. These teams focus on students and how to support them.

Table 1. Benchmarks for School Workplace Conditions

Benchmarks for...	Moving from...	Moving toward...
Teaching assignments	Out-of-field or split assignments; excessive teaching load or class size	Appropriate teaching assignments; fair and manageable teaching load and class size
Working relationships among teachers	Working in isolation from colleagues	Working collaboratively with colleagues
Support for new teachers	Sink-or-swim induction	Ongoing observation of, interaction with, and advice from experienced colleagues
Support for students	Little assistance for students or for teachers in working with students; inadequate family and community support	Collective teacher responsibility for student achievement, comprehensive student support services, school-family-community partnerships
Curricular support	Under- or overprescribed curriculum, often not aligned with standards	Complete, aligned curriculum that can be used flexibly
Resources and materials	Routine shortages of instructional supplies; teachers spend their own money for essentials	Sufficient resources and materials; teacher stipends for extras
Assessment	Excessive focus on tested topics and test-taking skills	Standardized tests, as one part of a comprehensive assessment strategy
Professional development	A miscellaneous selection of one-shot workshops	Coherent, job-embedded assistance that meets individual teachers’ instructional needs
Professional influence and career growth	Having the same influence and opportunities on the first day and last day of one’s career	Progressively expanding influence and increasing opportunities for career growth
Facilities	Inadequate, unsafe, decrepit buildings for some schools	Safe, well-maintained, well-equipped facilities for all schools
Principal’s leadership	Insufficient attention to workplace conditions and interdependent aspects of teacher’s work	Actively brokers workplace conditions; encourages teacher interdependence and collective work

Successful schools also have a variety of direct support services within the school for students, especially students with special needs. These include preschool, after-school, and summer programs that can provide academic support to supplement the teachers' efforts. In addition, nonacademic student supports (such as in-school health services) ensure that treatable problems do not compromise students' learning.

Finally, school, family, and community partnerships can enhance student learning and support teachers. Strategies include encouraging parents to become more active in their children's learning and in the day-to-day life of their schools; developing school-linked family support services, through which schools partner with social service agencies; and forging partnerships with neighborhood youth development organizations and programs.

Curricular Support for High Standards

Teachers overwhelmingly support higher standards for instruction and student achievement. To attain higher teaching standards, teachers need a well-developed curriculum that is aligned with state standards but is also flexible and not overly prescriptive. Too often, curricula are either inadequate or overprescribed.

Inadequate curricula take many forms. These include no curriculum at all, a curriculum that consists only of lists of topics and skills, or a curriculum that is not aligned with state standards and assessments or with the textbooks and materials used in the school. Sometimes state curricular frameworks are so extensive that teachers do not have time to teach all the specified topics. New teachers find inadequate curricula particularly daunting.

Although most teachers report that they have insufficient curricula, many teachers—particularly in large, low-income districts—report having curricula that are too prescriptive, especially in mathematics and language arts. The evidence on scripted curricula is mixed; thus, the approach has its supporters and detractors. New teachers often welcome the guidance the detailed curricula provide, as long as they can use the materials flexibly.

Sufficient Resources and Materials

Teachers expect their schools to provide the resources and materials they need to implement the curriculum and support good teaching. Resource needs range from the basics (e.g., paper, pencils, chalk, and textbooks) to more expensive equipment and services (e.g., science laboratories, computers with Internet connections, and photocopy machines). Typically, there are substantial inequities between schools serving wealthy and low-income communities in the availability of resources and materials. To ensure that teachers have what they need, some schools—usually in wealthy communities—provide extra stipends. However, most teachers spend their own money to succeed, or even survive. According to recent surveys, teachers spent an average of \$443 each per year on instructional resources. First-year teachers, who can least afford it, spent \$701 out of pocket on average.

Assessments for Accountability

Teachers are feeling the pressure of state accountability systems, and some believe there is too much focus on state tests. Professional standards in the field of assessment validate the notion that high-stakes decisions about students should not be based on a single test. Standardized accountability tests should be only one part of a more comprehensive assessment strategy.

Nevertheless, according to one recent survey, 66 percent of teachers said they were concentrating on tested information to the detriment of other important areas of learning. Subjects that are not tested are slighted, and tested subjects receive more emphasis. Teachers, especially in low-performing schools, believe they must emphasize what is tested, skip what is not tested, and explicitly teach test-taking skills.

Test-based accountability carries a price in teacher retention as well as in the quality of instruction. One recent study of teachers' reasons for leaving found test pressure ranked as the number one reason among new teachers who actually left and in the top three among more experienced teachers who might consider leaving.



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Professional Development

Challenging new learning goals for students are unlikely to be attained unless teachers themselves have opportunities for ongoing learning that go far beyond sporadic, short-term workshops that are driven by an external agenda and disconnected from instruction. Even though it is known to be ineffective, this approach still characterizes teacher professional development in many districts. One survey of teachers' experience with professional development indicated that 77 percent of respondents were most likely to have participated in system-sponsored workshops. Another survey indicated that nearly 50 percent of teachers had no training in using assessments for diagnostic purposes, and 28 percent had not received training in their state's academic standards.

In recent years, new approaches have emerged that focus on improving classroom teaching practice over the long term, using a coherent combination of within-school and external strategies. The focus of professional development in schools exemplifying best practice is on cultivating teacher professional communities. Within-school activities such as peer observation and lesson study are strategically combined with external learning opportunities. Teachers participating in effective professional communities and related activities are more successful in improving instruction in ways consistent with standards. They experience a sense of professional growth and satisfaction.

Expanded Influence and Career Growth

There is growing interest today in expanded and differentiated teacher roles that would provide expert teachers with additional responsibilities and opportunities for advancement. Experiments with career ladders that would allow teachers to assume expanded roles in such areas as professional development, curriculum writing, and mentoring have been tried in a number of places. Evaluations of Peer Assistance and Review Plans, which involved master teachers in the supervision and assessment of other teachers, generally showed that the programs demonstrated success both in offering opportunities to master teachers and in assisting the other participating teachers.

Although there has been considerable policy debate surrounding expanded influence and career ladders for teachers, a recent national survey found little overall change in teachers' influence since the late 1980s. However, there was considerable school-to-school variation in teachers' influence. Schools that delegated more control to teachers had fewer problems among teachers and less conflict between teachers and administrators. This was particularly true when teachers were involved in schoolwide decisions about student discipline and tracking.

Safe, Well-Equipped Facilities

Schools tend to be similar in their physical structure, but they vary widely in the extent to which they are maintained and equipped. A study of facilities in the mid-1990s documented serious deterioration of public schools, especially in urban areas.

Maintenance and functionality matter most to teachers. Inadequate facilities can interfere with instruction and teachers' sense of efficacy as they struggle with malfunctioning Bunsen burners, computers that do not work, or overcrowded classrooms. Teacher surveys indicate that facilities also play a role in teacher retention. According to one survey, of teachers who graded their facilities with a mark of C or lower, 40 percent said poor conditions caused them to consider changing schools, and 30 percent thought about leaving teaching.

The Principal as a Broker

From the teacher's perspective, the principal might be viewed as another feature of the organizational context of schooling. But the principal's role is so important to a school's success that it is singled out for special emphasis. The principal is the broker of school workplace conditions. An effective leader engages both experienced and novice teachers in productive work experiences, thus increasing the interdependence of all teachers and the coherence of the work they do together.

Success in Low-Income Schools

Low-income students, low-performing students, and students of color are far more likely than

other students to have teachers who are inexperienced, uncertified, poorly educated, and underperforming. These students attend “hard to staff” schools that have great difficulty in attracting and retaining teachers. Teachers in these schools experience much more challenging working conditions.

It is impossible to disentangle working conditions fully from other factors that might cause teachers to leave these schools. In making their decisions about whether to stay, transfer, or leave teaching, teachers consider whether they can be effective with students. Studies of effective schools serving low-income students indicate that they are characterized by many of the positive working conditions discussed earlier.

Conclusion

Current efforts to improve teaching and boost student achievement rely almost exclusively on

punitive measures or short-term incentives (such as cash rewards). These policies assume that teachers are not making sufficient effort in their work. These interventions may have some initial effect on student test scores. Research suggests, however, that investments to improve workplace conditions will have greater and longer-lasting benefits.

Research dealing with separate questions about teacher retention, teacher quality, and effective teaching all point to a set of workplace conditions as potential levers for success. Remarkably few schools—particularly those serving low-income students—exemplify all or even most of the workplace conditions identified here as the benchmarks teachers need to do their job well and stay in teaching. If public education is to retain high-quality teachers in all schools and enable them to teach effectively, comprehensive and systematic efforts to ensure that all schools become good workplaces are critical.



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Tip for Use

This material is most effectively used to frame group discussion among teachers and teacher-candidates in which the focus is on fundamentally rethinking school workplace conditions. As participants discuss the research concepts, they should be encouraged to contribute practical examples from their classrooms and school. The summary table can become an overhead transparency and may be useful as a discussion guide. The working paper on which this brief is based supports a more in-depth discussion.