

Governor Easley's Teacher Working Conditions Initiative

Teacher Working Conditions in Turnaround Team High Schools



While teacher working conditions directly impact student achievement across elementary, middle and high schools, survey results demonstrate that the effects are particularly acute in high schools, where teachers' perception of working conditions are generally more negative than their elementary and middle school colleagues. While North Carolina high schools collectively struggle to create positive conditions of work, educators at one subset of schools report less positive working conditions than the rest. Unfortunately, these traditionally hard-to-staff high schools are in the most need of working conditions that can improve teaching quality and student learning.

These high schools face a daunting challenge to attract and keep the teachers they need to improve student learning in schools as they serve high concentrations of low-performing, low-income students and have high percentages of teachers who are not fully certified and are more likely to leave the profession. Many of these schools face this challenge within a context of chronically under developed conditions of work.

These working conditions are residual over many years and are related to a complex set of socioeconomic factors influencing school operations. Conditions of teaching and learning in any school cannot be attributed to any single individual or factor, but rather the interplay of many related contextual circumstances and conditions that collectively shape school environments. Consequently, this brief is not intended to disparage the reform efforts of any school or group of schools. Instead, the piece highlights some common areas where reforms might be considered and some potential strategies for addressing frequent difficulties with conditions of work.

The brief considers "Turnaround Team high schools." Based on his rulings in Leandro I (1997) and Leandro II (2004), Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, Jr. issued a 45-page report in May 2005, outlining problems in 44 high schools and the need to fix them. Judge Manning further refined the list to 19 high-priority schools in March 2006, and indicated to the State Board that unless changes were made in management, planning and design, these 19 schools would not be allowed to open in the Fall of 2006.

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ANALYZING RESULTS OF THE 2006 TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEY

The Governor's Teacher Working Conditions Survey was conducted in April 2006. More than 75,000 educators responded (65 percent), creating data for and allowing for the analysis of results from 85 percent of all schools, almost 2,000 North Carolina schools (281 high schools). In order to better understand current working conditions in both the 44 Turnaround Team high schools and the subset of 19 high-priority high schools, CTQ examined the survey results for these schools relative to all other high schools in the state.¹

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1. Data was available for all but 4 of the 44 Turnaround schools. Hugh M. Cummings High School (Alamance), Westover High School (Cumberland), Southern Guilford High (Guilford) and Olympic High School (Charlotte-Mecklenburg) did not have sufficient response rates to allow for analyses. Data was compared to an additional 243 high schools.

Teacher working conditions—demonstrated in 2004 and 2006 to be critical to the success of children and the retention of teachers—are poorer in the Turnaround Team high schools, particularly in the 19 high-priority high schools (Table 1). It should be noted that this analysis represents an aggregate performance for these high-priority high schools, and some schools are performing markedly better on these measures than others. The results across all five working conditions areas were significantly different between the high-priority schools and other high schools. While the educators in the other Turnaround Team high schools had more negative perceptions of working conditions, only in the area of school leadership were they significantly different.

Table 1. Teacher Working Conditions Domain Averages in Turnaround Team and Other High Schools

Teacher Working Conditions Area	19 High-Priority Turnaround Team High Schools	Other Turnaround Team High Schools	All Other High Schools
Time	2.73**	3.18	3.22
Professional Development	3.08*	3.29	3.34
Empowerment	2.91*	3.20	3.39
Leadership	3.02*	3.31*	3.54
Facilities and Resources	3.24*	3.38	3.56

Results are the mean average for each domain on the working conditions survey. The mean is a composite of all statistically connected questions in that area on a 1-to-5 scale with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest.

* = statistically significant difference between schools and other high schools using ANOVA analyses at the .05 level.

** = statistically significant difference between 19 High Priority schools and other high schools AND Turnaround Team schools

While teachers in the high-priority schools are much less likely to note the presence of positive working conditions in all areas studied in the survey, three areas were found to be of particular concern given the gaps between Turnaround Team and other high schools: time, empowerment and leadership. These disparities are even more problematic given the connections found between empowerment and retention, as well as leadership and performance in the 2004 analyses. On the 2006 survey, teachers noted that leadership was by far the most important consideration as to whether they will remain in their current position. In particular, several concerns are raised by examining educator responses to specific questions on the survey (Table 2).

- *Educators in the Turnaround Team high schools do not feel trusted.* Research has shown the importance of trust as a critical factor in school improvement and student learning (i.e. Bryk, 2002). Educators in Turnaround Team high schools are much less likely to note an atmosphere of trust in their school (one-third in the high priority schools vs. almost two-thirds in other high schools) and do not believe they are trusted to make good decisions about instruction (about one-half vs. three-quarters respectively).
- *Turnaround Team high schools have safety and discipline concerns.* Far fewer educators in Turnaround Team high schools believe that their school environment is safe and that they are supported in maintaining discipline in their classrooms.
- *More time is needed for planning and instruction in high priority Turnaround Team high schools.* Teachers in the 19 high priority schools noted the need for more time to plan and collaborate and were more likely to cite duties that distract them from instruction.

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- *School leadership in Turnaround Team high schools is not providing teachers opportunities to impact their school.* Teachers, particularly in the high priority Turnaround Team schools are less likely to feel involved in making important education decisions and are less likely to rate school leadership as effective.

Table 2. Teacher Agreement on Select Teacher Working Condition Questions in Turnaround Team and Other High Schools

Percentage of Educators Agreeing with Teacher Working Conditions Question	19 High-Priority Turnaround Team High Schools	Other Turnaround Team High Schools	All Other High Schools
The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient	40%**	57%	61%
Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students	25%**	44%	44%
Teachers and staff work in a school environment that is safe	53%**	67%	80%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction	47%**	60%	73%
Teachers are centrally involved in decision making about educational issues	31%**	40%	49%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	35%**	50%*	63%
Opportunities are available for the members of the community to contribute actively to this school's success	41%*	55%*	67%
The school leadership supports teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom	42%*	54%*	68%
Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective	40%*	52%*	64%

* = statistically significant difference between schools and other high schools using ANOVA analyses at the .05 level.

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As a result of these challenges, teachers look to leave positions in Turnaround Team high schools, perpetuating the staffing difficulties they already face. Teachers in the Turnaround Team high schools were more likely to indicate a desire to move from their current school and leave teaching altogether. While 8 percent of North Carolina high school teachers indicated a desire to move from their current school and 6 percent wanted to quit teaching, a full 19 percent of teachers in the 19 high priority Turnaround Team high schools want to move to a new school (15 percent for the other Turnaround Team high schools) and 9 percent express a desire to leave teaching. Until these critical working conditions issues are addressed, new teachers will leave these high schools in search of schools that provide support and opportunities to be successful with students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School improvement is a long and difficult process, and designing and implementing high school reform is particularly challenging. The high school reform efforts underway in North Carolina through the New Schools Project as well as the Learn and Earn high schools can provide some guidance as to curricular and school design change that can help in these 44 Turnaround Team high schools. It will, however, be more difficult than simply adapting a model that has worked elsewhere or consulting outside experts who do not necessarily become part of the community and the school. It will take building the capacity of these 44 schools to recruit, retain and support teachers who can make the difference in high schools designed for

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teaching and learning. Building this capacity requires a frank discussion of what is working and what is not. It also involves bringing educators already in these schools into a process that respects their efforts and values what they can contribute to the success of their school. Ultimately, shining a light on the performance of these schools is necessary, but attention that is not constructive toward improvement will only perpetuate the distrust felt by educators and create further staffing dilemmas.

The state should consider the following to address some of the working conditions disparities documented in this report.

1. ***Provide the right combination of support for educators in Turnaround Team high schools, with greater emphasis on the high priority schools.*** CTQ documented reforms in Mobile, Ala., where the district reconstituted five chronically low-performing schools, provided signing and performance bonuses for educators, and gave additional support in the form of intensive professional development as well as both an achievement specialist and an academic coach (see www.teachingquality.org). It was the combination of staff and support that led to renewed commitment for school reform and remarkable gains in several schools. Additional, permanent state-funded educators can become part of a school team that works collaboratively to analyze data, change practice and improve instruction.
2. ***Provide school leaders with the professional development they need to understand how to appropriately engage teachers in important education decisions.*** Leadership should not be vested in a single individual or small group. Instead, leadership should be distributed more broadly among members of the school to more fully tap the resource of accomplished and expert teachers. Teachers should be providing professional development for colleagues, serving on hiring committees, developing and/or selecting curriculum, and leading school improvement teams. To implement this leadership model requires investments in the knowledge and skills of principals.
3. ***Attract accomplished teachers by giving them the opportunity to direct the success of not only their classroom, but their school.*** As North Carolina high schools rightly move toward more rigorous and relevant curriculum to help students compete in the 21st century marketplace of ideas, the 19 high-priority Turnaround High Schools will benefit tremendously from empowering teachers to make decisions about instruction. The teachers, who have close relationships with students, are often most qualified to create the course of instruction relevant to the lives and future goals of those students. Turnaround High Schools should engage their most accomplished teachers in designing more rigorous and relevant curriculum.

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Teacher Working Conditions Advisory Board