

Teacher Working Conditions in Turnaround Team High Schools

Eric Hirsch and Scott Emerick, Center for Teaching Quality

North Carolina has become a leader in the national movement toward creating new, smaller high schools that can prepare students for the 21st century demands of higher education and the workforce. Governor Easley has established 13 (with 21 additional schools scheduled to open this Fall) Learn and Earn schools to provide students with at least two years of college credit. The New Schools Project is creating or redesigning 75 high schools. The North Carolina Center for 21st Century Skills is allowing business and education leaders to promote a collective vision for dramatically changing high schools across the state.

Nowhere is this transformation of high schools more important than in those that have been struggling to provide academic rigor to traditionally underserved students. In hearings held as part of the Leandro rulings, 44 high schools were identified as lacking this rigor. The list was further refined to 19 high-priority schools by the Court in March 2006.

Making improvements in these high schools will require a focus on what research has consistently demonstrated matters most in student achievement—teaching quality (e.g., Ferguson, 1991; Sanders and Rivers, 1996). And we know that improving teacher working conditions will be necessary to attract, retain and support teachers in the 44 Turnaround Team high schools. Consider the following from analysis by the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) of the more than 34,000 educator responses on the Governor's Teacher Working Conditions Survey in 2004.

- High schools were 48 times more likely to be included in one of the top three ABC school designation categories (School of Distinction or above) for every one point increase on what educators said about the quality of leadership on the survey. Professional development as well as facilities and resources were also linked to growth and success on the ABCs.
- Teacher working conditions were significantly connected to teacher retention. Empowerment, in particular, had a significant impact on teacher retention at the high school level.
- High schools, more so than elementary or middle schools, had lower teacher perceptions on the presence of critical working conditions across the state.

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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). School level data is available for 85 percent of schools that achieved a 40 percent response rate (almost 2,000 North Carolina schools and 281 high schools). In order to better understand current working conditions in both the 44

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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

Teacher working conditions—demonstrated in 2004 to be critical to the success of children and the retention of teachers—are poorer in the Turnaround Team high schools, and in the 19 high-priority high schools in particular (Table 1). The results across all five working conditions areas were significantly different between the high-priority schools and other high schools in the state. 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.

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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 in this category 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. Further, on the 2006 survey, teachers noted that leadership, by far, was 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 (e.g., 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 face 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.

Educators in Turnaround Team high schools do not feel trusted.

1. Data were 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 were compared to an additional 243 high schools.

- *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.
- *School leadership in Turnaround Team high schools is not providing teachers opportunities to impact their school.* Teachers 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.

School leadership in Turnaround Team high schools is not providing teachers opportunities to impact their school.

Percent 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 in this category 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			

Until these critical working conditions are addressed, these high schools will face a revolving door of new teachers who come in and soon after leave in search of schools that provide them with the support and opportunities to be successful with their students.

The end result of these differences is teachers looking to leave their positions in the Turnaround Team high schools, perpetuating already existing staffing difficulties. 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 high school teachers noted on the survey 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, these high schools will face a revolving door of new teachers who come in and soon after leave in search of schools that provide them with the support and opportunities to be successful with their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 exacerbate staffing dilemmas.

School improvement is a long and difficult process, and developing the knowledge and skills to design and implement high school reform is particularly challenging. No doubt the reform efforts in North Carolina in the New Schools Project as well as Learn and Earn high schools can provide some guidance as to curricular and school design change that can help these 44 Turnaround Team high schools. Successful reform, however, will be more difficult than simply adapting a model that has worked elsewhere or bringing in 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 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 exacerbate staffing dilemmas.

We recommend the state 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, AL, 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 a renewed commitment to school reform and remarkable gains in several of the 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 investment 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 a 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 with close relationships with students are often times most qualified to create the course of instruction most relevant to the lives and future goals of those students. Turnaround High Schools should undertake efforts to engage their most accomplished teachers in shaping the planning process for redesigning more rigorous and relevant curriculum.

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