Building a Professional Culture

How school leaders can create work environments that inspire effective teaching and teacher satisfaction.

MARCH 2011
Building a healthy professional culture is key to developing and retaining an effective teacher workforce. Understanding and responding to teacher needs improves workplace satisfaction, prevents adversarial dynamics, and allows teachers to focus their energy on improving student outcomes.
Contents of the Professional Culture Toolkit

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

- What factors influence teacher satisfaction?
- How can schools improve the satisfaction of strong instructional teams?
- How can schools develop and maintain open, two-way communication between teachers and administrators?
- How can schools diagnose and monitor teacher satisfaction and professional culture?

**TOOLS**

- Strategies for reducing teacher workload
- Practices around encouraging open, frequent and honest communication between administration and teaching staff
- Staff satisfaction surveys
Charter teachers are generally satisfied with their school’s administration.

Percent of teachers who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that “I am satisfied with the quality of my school’s administration.”

Teachers in two mid-size urban districts were less satisfied with their administrations, reporting 55% and 57% for the same question.*

*Data from surveys conducted by The New Teacher Project in selected school districts. Included for comparative purposes.
Yet many teachers plan to leave their current school in the next three years to continue teaching elsewhere.

61 percent of teachers plan to leave their school in the next three years, and 43 percent of them plan to continue teaching once they leave their current school.

Of teachers who plan to leave their school in the next three years: "Which of the following best describes your plans after leaving your current school?"

- Continue teaching: 43%
- Retire: 1%
- Leave PreK-12 education: 6%
- Go to graduate school full-time: 17%
- Non-teaching role in school/district: 13%
- Other: 20%
Teacher satisfaction drops over the first three years at a school.

While 94% of teachers are satisfied with their school choice when they first accept the job offer, that satisfaction drops to only 56% by the teacher’s third year in the school.

Percent of teachers “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their current school choice, by number of years at school:

- First Year: 72%
- Second Year: 69%
- Third Year: 56%
- Fourth Year: 56%
- Five Years or More: 69%
Promising Practices for Building a Healthy Professional Culture

1. **Manage Workload:** Identify efficiencies that conserve teachers’ time to help prevent high-performers from leaving due to work-life imbalances.

2. **Maintain Multiple Lines of Communication:** Provide teachers with multiple open channels for both giving and receiving feedback.

3. **Recognize Excellence:** Take time to offer formal and informal recognition of achievements, both large and small.

4. **Address All Aspects of Human Capital:** Organizations perceived to be strong in all areas of human capital tend to have much more satisfied teachers – simply excelling in one or two areas is insufficient.
Promising Practices in Action

1. Manage Teacher Workload
   - Rocketship Education has made reduction of teacher workload an organizational priority and is implementing concrete action plans to free teacher capacity and allow the teacher to focus on higher-order learning.

2. Maintain Multiple Lines of Communication
   - Brighter Choice for Girls principals hold one-on-one meetings with every staff member every two weeks to ensure open lines of communication and provide explicit coaching and support.

3. Take Time to Recognize Excellence
   - Teachers across charter networks report that public recognition of a job well done increases their planned retention.

4. Address All Aspects of Human Capital
   - Improving each aspect of human capital management increases teachers’ levels of satisfaction.
Less than half of administrators and even fewer teachers view teachers’ workload as sustainable.

Percent of teachers who agree that “My workload is sustainable over the long-term.”

- Strongly Agree: 6%
- Agree: 25%
- All Others*: 69%

Percent of administrators who agree that “My teachers’ workloads are sustainable over the long-term”

- Strongly Agree: 11%
- Agree: 35%
- All Others*: 54%

*Respondents who chose “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” Somewhat Disagree” or “Somewhat Agree.”
Workload is the top concern for teachers who are considering leaving their schools.

Top reasons for leaving, among teachers planning to leave their schools within three years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Compensation</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Leadership</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility of future roles</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student conduct and learning environment</td>
<td>13%</td>
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</table>

*Reasons listed among top two, not including “Personal Reasons.”

“The current amount of work that we have to do on a daily basis is more than expected, and honestly, more than I have time for. If we did not have so much extra work to do outside of school, I would not be considering leaving.”

– 4th year math teacher

“The school is not as committed to teacher-success as it is to student-success. The work load for teachers is far too demanding and not all tasks are necessary.”

– 1st year teacher
Setting expectations during recruitment can have some impact on teachers’ feelings about their workload.

Only half of all teachers “agree” or “strongly agree” that the recruitment process effectively prepared them for what to expect in their roles.

- 43% of teachers who felt prepared by the recruitment process believe that their workload is sustainable in the long term…

- …compared to only 19% of teachers who did not feel that the recruitment process prepared them for what to expect.
Managing workload requires careful planning.

Internal 5-year goals: Make teaching … a much better job for highly effective teachers by making work hours more maintainable, providing support staff, job responsibilities more academic and pay commensurate with social value of a teacher.

Sub-goal: 12 Hour Workday by 2015, 10 Hour Workday by 2020

Actions Taken to Reduce Teacher Workload

• Developed scope and sequence and unit plans for every course.
• Created homework binders with assignments for every state standard.
• Catalogued lessons and resources online for teachers.
• Uses substitute teachers to administer and score interim assessments.
• Staffs silent reading center with non-certified personnel.
• Uses college students to conduct supplemental tutoring.
• Interns shadow teachers to record how hours are spent and identify additional efficiencies.
Workload can be managed by providing additional support.

Citizens Academy

Supports teachers with one Instructional Assistant per grade and volunteer tutors to give kids one-on-one attention.

"The instructional assistants help because they’re doing administrative work, or will pull out one kid, or grade things...help with bulletin boards...it really does reduce stress. We have a ton of well-educated tutors, college students, parents, and volunteers, which alleviates a little stress too..." – 6th year elementary teacher

Provides supplies, materials, and instructional support on request.

"If you need stuff, they don’t want you going out to buy supplies. They respect teachers’ time, by giving us additional in-school time for report cards. It’s little things to make sure you don’t feel stressed. The just give it to you, and that for me is helpful." – 1st year elementary teacher
Many teachers express frustration over a lack of communication.

• “[Our school could have] better communication and better reception to and more solicitation of input from teachers especially when matters concerning classroom policies, organization and instruction are concerned.” – 1st year high school English teacher

• “I really like my principal, but she can have a ‘kill the messenger’ approach to problems that discourages complete communication.” – 28th year elementary teacher

• “There is a very top down management style which does not invite faculty participation on school wide decisions, yet expects the faculty to enforce those decisions with little buy in...Overall, I think the school is accomplishing results for students but could be greatly improved by creating systems through which teacher input is truly invited, valued, and cultivated.” – 3rd year high school history teacher
Administrators overestimate teachers’ opportunities to provide feedback.

- **75%** of administrators “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that “teachers have avenues to deliver feedback to their supervisors about their performance.”

  ![Pie chart showing 25% Strongly Agree, 29% Agree, 46% All Others]

- **41%** percent of teachers “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that “I have avenues to deliver feedback to my supervisor about their performance.”

  ![Pie chart showing 16% Strongly Agree, 25% Agree, 59% All Others]
Common communication pitfalls can hinder charter schools.

**Bunker Mentality**

Since charter schools often feel under attack, some charter leaders “hunker down, assume all criticism is invalid, and wall themselves off from potential innovations and improvements.”

**Mission Above All**

An intense focus on student achievement is very beneficial. “However, balancing that focus with issues such as teacher burnout may be necessary to ensure that long-term viability of the mission.”

**Inadequate Capacity to Be Strategic**

“Due to resource constraints, sometimes it’s hard for leaders to step back and think about long-term strategy for maintaining a healthy work environment.”

Many smaller networks lack dedicated staff to focus on these long-term priorities.

*All quotes – Sylvia Ewing – Director of External Affairs, Illinois Network of Charter Schools*
Effective communication requires multiple channels for teachers to give and receive information.

Communication Indicators

1. “I know who to contact when I have a question or problem.”
2. “There is open and honest two-way communication between administration and staff.”
3. “I have avenues to deliver feedback to my supervisor about their performance.”

Satisfaction of Teachers by Number of Communication Indicators Present*

*Respondents who chose “Strongly Agree” or “Agree.”
A variety of methods can be used to assess school culture.

- **Aspire Public Schools** – Administers annual satisfaction surveys of staff, parents and students to get a 360-degree picture of building and network-level culture. Results are regularly monitored by Aspire’s Board of Directors.

- **North Star Academy** – Conducts annual School Culture survey of all teachers. Currently testing other tools that informally assess collegiality and professional culture by observing teacher habits in the hallways, teachers’ lounge, while collaborating, etc.

- **Brighter Choice for Girls** – Principal holds bi-weekly meetings with every teacher and maintains a constant open line of communication via email.

  > “[The principal] makes time to see us… she asks if there are concerns, do you know what to do… Those 10-minute meetings have such an impact…Having emails in class is nice. If I feel overwhelmed during class I can email [the principal], there is a consistently open line of communication”

  – 1st year elementary teacher
Teachers who feel appreciated report higher planned retention.

Percent of Teachers who “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that “I feel appreciated for my hard work at my school.”

- 24% of teachers plan to stay until the end of this school year.
- 55% plan to stay 2 or 3 more years.
- 74% plan to stay 4 or more years.

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- “I just love getting shout outs in our newsletter and at our meetings…it is simply satisfying intrinsically.”
  - 4th year elementary teacher

- “[I appreciate] recognition of contributions through staff awards or notes of praise all of which are felt to be sincere and are appreciated.”
  - 6th year English teacher

- “My administrators tell me I’m a star all the time. Positive reinforcement works with teachers, too!”
  - 2nd year English teacher
A comprehensive approach to human capital management drives greater teacher satisfaction.

**Key Teacher Survey Questions**

**RECRUITMENT**
“The recruitment process effectively prepared me for what to expect in my role at my school.”

**EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT**
“The professional development I receive at my school is tailored according to feedback and/or development areas from my performance evaluation.”

**RECOGNITION**
“Teachers’ accomplishments are regularly recognized and celebrated.”

**PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY**
“Teachers are held accountable for their performance.”

**SCHOOL CULTURE**
“I feel appreciated for my hard work at my school.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of questions with which teacher agreed*</th>
<th>Percent of teachers satisfied with their current school**</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Five</td>
<td>95%</td>
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*Includes “Strongly Agree” or “Agree.”
**Percent “Satisfied” or “Very Satisfied.”