Executive Summary

Teachers' Time Use

A Review of the Literature

TNTP

Introduction

Teachers are the backbone of our education system, shaping not only the academic success of millions of students but also their long-term well-being and economic mobility. One out of every 12 college-educated workers in the U.S. serves as a PK-12 or special education teacher, making educators a vital and influential part of the national workforce. Their value, however, extends far beyond their numbers; research consistently shows that teacher quality is the single most important school-based factor in determining students' motivation, academic achievement, and future outcomes.

The impact of great teaching is not just immediate but also enduring. As TNTP explored in *Paths of Opportunity*, young people who have access to high-quality academic experiences and excel in school are also more likely to earn a living wage and report high levels of well-being in adulthood. In fact, economists have found that students who move from an average teacher to an excellent teacher in a single grade can expect to earn thousands of *additional dollars* over their lifetimes.

Despite their central role, teachers increasingly view their profession as unsustainable. In 2024, more than 60% of teachers reported experiencing burnout, often citing heavy workloads and insufficient support as key factors. While we know that teachers matter profoundly, there is still much to learn about how they spend their days and how the use of their time influences both their own well-being and student learning. This is a critical gap; if we want to maximize the impact of teachers on student learning, well-being, and long-term opportunity, we must ensure their jobs are sustainable and that they are empowered to use their time efficiently and effectively.

This literature review synthesizes dozens of sources, including academic studies, surveys, research reports, and news articles to surface consistent themes about how teachers use their time, the demands they face, and the often-blurred lines between work and personal life. Our analysis reveals that teachers work substantially more hours than their contracts require, with much of their time consumed by non-instructional tasks that contribute to stress and burnout. Time use also varies by teacher experience, school context, and student population, with those serving the highest-need students often spending less time on instruction. Recent shifts—such as the rise of educational technologies—have further complicated teachers' workloads.

By understanding these dynamics, education leaders and policy makers can take concrete steps to support teachers, improving not just their effectiveness, but also their well-being and retention in the profession. Ultimately, optimizing how teachers spend their time is both an opportunity to improve a critical workforce issue and a critical lever for advancing student learning and lifelong success. It's crucial to understand how to support teacher quality and effectiveness—and how to make teachers' jobs more sustainable.

Key Findings

Finding #1: Teachers report working longer hours than their contracts require, contributing to the stress and burnout that many experience on the job.

Estimates of teachers' total working time are wide-ranging, from roughly 35 hours to upwards of 50 hours per week. In most cases, reports of the typical workload exceed teachers' contractual obligations (just under 40 hours per week on average) by a substantial margin. The responsibilities that comprise teachers' time go well beyond instruction, although it consumes the largest share of teachers' time (at least 40 percent, according to most surveys). Teachers also spend a considerable amount of time on lesson planning and preparation (roughly 20 percent), and the remainder of their time is spread across a range of tasks, such as completing administrative paperwork, collaborating with colleagues, communicating with parents, providing their students with emotional support, and attending professional development. While some estimates show that teachers spend a small percentage (about 2 percent) of their time engaged in professional development, in some districts the amount of time spent engaged in professional learning may be much higher. In TNTP's report *The Mirage* for example, the teachers in the study reported spending nineteen full school days per year—nearly ten percent of a typical school year—on participating in professional development activities.

Teachers' long working hours are a significant contributor to stress that many report experiencing on the job. Survey data suggest that the diffusiveness and scope of teachers' responsibilities may likewise negatively influence teachers' morale and emotional wellbeing, particularly when it comes to tasks that they do not view to be core to their teaching roles. Teachers express an interest in more opportunities for rest and recovery, but may be less likely to take time off work (even when they are sick) than people working in similar fields. In fact, they tend to spend far more time working during off hours, including on weekends and holidays.

This reflects the relatively unstructured nature of much of teachers' work; teachers can and often do bring their work home with them. At the same time, boundaries even within individual professional responsibilities can be porous, with teachers frequently engaged in multitasking or subject to disruptions that may contribute to relatively high rates of burnout and stress among educators.

Finding #2: Research demonstrates the benefits of teacher time spent on instruction—and teachers value that time more than time spent on non-instructional tasks.

The full extent of teachers' working time is often not assigned a consistent financial value, given that they work more hours than they are typically paid for in their contracts.

While some of their additional work may be compensated, survey data show that the average teacher is paid for just three out of an estimated fifteen hours beyond their contracted weekly working time. This difference is reflected in teachers' generally low satisfaction with the adequacy of their salaries, given the work that they do.

Beyond financial compensation, teachers find intrinsic value in their work, but this varies across tasks. Teachers consistently prefer to spend more time on instruction, during which they tend to experience more positive emotions, and less time on administrative tasks, grading, and assessment. They tend to experience more negative emotions and higher levels of stress in relation to non-instructional activities, particularly when they are engaged in administrative and grading tasks.

Teachers are not the only educational stakeholders for whom instructional time holds great value; there is a substantial body of literature demonstrating the benefits of instructional time on student achievement. The allocation of time within instructional tasks matters as well. Instructional time devoted to practicing concepts may yield stronger benefits to student achievement in math, while interactive discussion time may be more productive for student learning in English language arts. We do not yet know, however, how time investments in other activities, such as non-instructional interactions with students or additional planning and preparation time, might influence students.

Shanel Wells, Learning Acceleration Specialist, guides a student through a hands-on activity.

Finding #3: Time use varies across teacher experience, identities, and educational contexts, resulting in young people who need the most instructional time being least likely to receive it.

Teachers in their early-to-mid careers and in their thirties tend to spend fewer hours on the job compared to more experienced teachers. In addition to overall working hours, teachers' experience is associated with the share of time they devote to instruction. Experienced educators dedicate more time within their lessons on actual instruction and less time on classroom management, in contrast to novice educators, for whom discipline and classroom management are greater struggles. Other TNTP research in *The Opportunity Myth* (2018) also demonstrated that students of color, students experiencing poverty, multilingual students, and students with learning and thinking differences were less likely than their more privileged peers to receive access to learning experiences aligned with grade-level standards. Combined, this research indicates that students who need the best school experiences most are receiving less instruction in the time they spend in class and are also focusing on less rigorous content than their peers.

A teachers' race and ethnicity, and the composition of the students they teach, is likewise associated with time-use patterns. Teachers of color tend to work longer hours than white teachers—both in terms of their contracted and self-reported time. There are likewise differences in teacher time use across student bodies served, with educators whose students are lower performing, whose students experience poverty, and whose students attend less-resourced schools spending less of their classroom time on instruction and more time on classroom management. Robust evidence shows that students learn more when they have more instructional time, but students who need the most instructional time don't get it.

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The reasons for these differences are not well explained by existing research, but these patterns may in part reflect that novice educators and teachers of color are disproportionately represented in schools with fewer resources and higher levels of student need.

In some cases, surveys on teachers' time use have disaggregated patterns by gender, with results suggesting no meaningful difference in total working hours between male and female teachers. However, male teachers are more likely to take on extra school-related work for pay and female educators are generally less satisfied with the hours that they work and more likely to attribute their dissatisfaction to feeling that they feel like the cannot get their work done no matter how many hours they put in. This suggests that workloads and burdens might be felt differently across genders even where total working hours may be comparable.

Finally, evidence about differences across school levels is mixed, but suggests slightly longer working hours for teachers serving upper grades, where there are more opportunities for additional work outside of traditional school hours, such as supervising extracurricular activities or teaching summer school.

Finding #4: While overall workloads have not meaningfully changed over the last two decades, factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, frequent shifts in curricula and standards, and alternative schooling models may have negatively impacted teachers' time and sense of burnout.

While longitudinal educator time use measures are rare, the available data suggest that teachers' weekly working hours have held steady over approximately the past quarter century. However, other factors may have contributed to temporary dips and rises in teachers' total working hours, as well as how their time is distributed. For example, frequent changes in learning standards, assessments, and curricula may alter teachers' allocation of time toward learning and preparing for new teaching expectations and contexts.

More dramatically, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a major shock to institutions worldwide. There is mixed evidence about its effects on the amount of time teachers put into their jobs during the pandemic, but strong evidence that the intensity and focus of their work shifted dramatically. Specifically, several surveys show that teachers reallocated instructional time toward other activities, such as collaborative planning and providing social-emotional support to their students. These pandemic-induced shifts may continue even today, with high shares of teachers reporting that they are spending more time dealing with students' behavioral issues and addressing their students' socio-emotional needs. Data suggest that these factors may have led to teachers having more intense workloads that continue to harm their wellbeing, with persistently high levels of stress and burnout in the profession.

Focused and engaged students collaborate as their teacher guides them through an activity.

Challenges with educational working conditions have only grown in recent years. In 2023, educators reported spending more of their class time addressing student behavior and mental health issues after the pandemic. They cited non-teaching tasks as their top sources of job-related stress, notably managing student behavior (45 percent), administrative work outside of teaching (33 percent), and supporting students' mental health and wellbeing (23 percent). As TNTP found in *The Irreplaceables*, poor working conditions and instructional culture can drive great teachers from the classroom.

Finally, in recent years, districts have been increasingly adopting alternative school models with direct implications for teachers' working time. This includes hybrid schools, extended-year schools, extended-day schools, and schools with four-day school weeks. Evidence across these models suggests that while four-day weeks are relatively popular with teachers, they may lead to worse learning outcomes for students and might even harm educator retention, given that they typically come with lower pay. There are conflicting tradeoffs in terms of school day and year length, but structures that are more beneficial for teachers are not necessarily more conducive for student learning gains. Findings suggest that students might experience larger learning gains from more hours in the day rather than more days in the year, while teachers may benefit from shorter—and therefore theoretically more manageable— workdays than from increased opportunity for time off.

Finding #5: Learning more about how teachers spend their time has the potential to enable systems to improve student learning but requires careful work by researchers.

One important consideration for time-use measurement is how to ask educators about their time use. Recall-based time estimates are prevalent in time-use research and relatively easy to collect, but prone to error, particularly when respondents are asked to recall one point in time relative to another further in the past. In contrast, time-diary data—from near-contemporaneous questions about time use—are generally more reliable and less subject to bias, but more onerous to capture.

In addition to survey format, researchers' definitional decisions can influence findings. For example, the question of what constitutes a typical work week can be complicated by the seasonality of teachers' work; their workloads often vary across seasons, making time-use estimates subject to bias based on data collection timing and decisions about what working periods to include. Similarly, the spillover nature of teachers' work requires thoughtful decisions about where and how researchers draw working-time boundaries, given that teachers often work outside of their official contracted hours and might have work and non-work tasks that bleed into the same time.

Other important considerations include: being explicit about definitions for aspects of teachers' time use (e.g., identifying the types of tasks and activities that constitute planning time); how to draw boundaries between overlapping tasks; which individuals make for an appropriate comparison group; and whether survey respondents are sufficiently representative of the teaching force to draw appropriate inferences about teachers' time.

Finding #6: Teachers report rising use of AI, and leaders across the system have a significant opportunity to make sure AI improves—rather than disrupts—students' and teachers' experiences.

AI use in professional contexts is rapidly rising, including in the educator workforce. AI has the potential to reshape industries and jobs worldwide, presenting a unique opportunity to consider automating educational tasks. Deciding which tasks are the right ones to automate will be important, as education remains an essentially human endeavor.

It's quite possible that AI and human teachers will excel at different tasks, with AI adding capacity to process vast amounts of data or providing feedback at scale, while educators bring human interaction and emotional intelligence to their work.

While use of AI by teachers is still in its early stages, teachers already report using AI-assisted tools for a variety of work-related tasks, as well as being interested in additional training on how to leverage AI in their work. Qualitative evidence suggests that teachers use AI to support time-consuming tasks, but the tools' output may require additional time for review and revision. Other research suggests that tools can present information with misleading confidence which causes less-savvy users to overestimate the quality of AI-supported materials. Meanwhile, as their students' use of AI likewise increases, teachers may need to spend additional time designing lessons and assignments that preclude students from taking learning shortcuts.

Although data on AI use specific to time optimization are only emergent at this point, early evidence suggests that AI can nevertheless support effective and efficient teaching when certain conditions are met. Tools that are designed in close alignment with specific educational uses tend to perform better; for example, a tutor feedback tool called Tutor CoPilot that incorporates expert teachers' decision-making processes into its training materials has been shown to meaningfully enhance the quality of tutoring students receive. That being said, experimental evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that even generalized tools like ChatGPT may support the efficiency of educators' lesson development—at least when the educators are given resources and a tightly-structured framework for implementing AI-assisted lesson planning.

Students at Desert Oasis Elementary School smile as they work on tablet computers.

Recommendations for the Field

This review of the literature demonstrates that teachers' time use is a topic that is ripe for further research. Existing evidence suggests that funders, policymakers, technology developers, and school administrators may be able to enact meaningful, beneficial change. A of list recommendations for major stakeholder groups below:

School administrators and education policymakers: Create structures and systems that support teachers' effective and efficient time use.

1. **Work to understand how teachers perceive the instructional culture of their schools, including how teachers are asked to use their time.** Leverage surveys, like *TNTP's Instructional Culture Insight Survey*, to gather feedback from educators regarding how they spend their time and perceive their working conditions.

2. **Engage educators in redefining the role of a teacher by intentionally reimagining the structure and instructional culture of schooling.** Redefine the responsibilities of teaching roles, ensuring that there are common expectations regarding who within a school should be responsible for various tasks. Then, consider implementing flexible staffing models, such as the *Next Education Workforce (NEW) ™* or *Public Impact (Opportunity Culture) ®* models that differentiate roles while establishing team-based, collaborative teaching environments.

3. **Provide resources and differentiated supports that enable classroom teachers to focus on instruction aligned to that redefined teacher role.** After defining the role, district leaders can adopt high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) to streamline the time teachers spend creating lesson materials so that teachers can focus most on delivering high-quality instruction. To support successful implementation, school and district leaders should ensure that teachers have dedicated planning time built into their schedules, with some autonomy for educators to adapt that time according to their individual professional-learning needs. Shift resources to ensure that there are sufficient support staff in schools to enable teachers to focus on their core instructional responsibilities. Finally, have a clear perspective on the role ed tech and AI should play in streamlining teacher time use, and provide teachers with training and resources that reflect that perspective.

4. **Incorporate simple opportunities to streamline the demands on teachers' time.** Adopt HQIM once, then be cognizant that updating and revising curricula, assessments and standards take significant teacher time and mental energy. Additionally, set communication policies that respect boundaries between professional and personal time. To reduce the cognitive load of interruptions and distractions, administrators should concentrate calls and announcements to non-instructional times to avoid disrupting teaching and learning and restrict announcements to only the applicable classrooms.

Researchers: Build a more robust and nuanced evidence base.

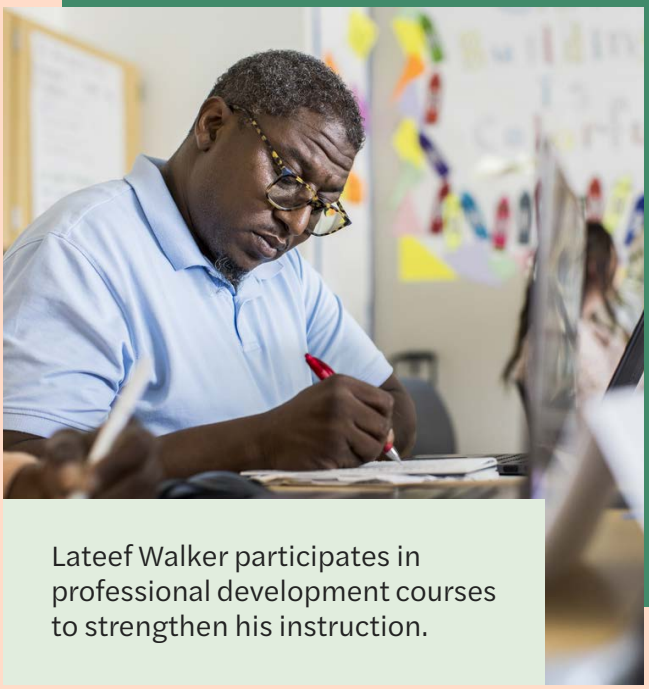
1. **Measure teacher time use in multiple ways across multiple time periods.** To build clarity across inconsistent estimates of teachers' working hours, incorporate multiple measures of time use in a single study, ideally disaggregating variation across teacher characteristics. Collect detailed longitudinal data to document temporal changes in the nature of teachers' time use, allowing the field to better understand calendar-based variation in workloads, time burdens, and time allocations.

2. **Develop new teacher time use measures.** Explore measures that allow for disentangling working hours from workload intensity, where workload intensity represents the work that teachers must do even if those tasks remain unfinished.

3. **Build an understanding of how different uses of teacher time affect student achievement.** Investigate the return on time investments to non-instructional activities for students or teachers. At this point, we simply do not have a clear understanding of the tradeoffs between different types of time use and how those decisions might differ across teachers and teaching contexts.

4. **Conduct rigorous, causal research on the conditions and policies that enable efficient and effective time use.** This research would go a long way toward helping districts and educational technology developers implement policies, practices, and tools that will best serve their staff, students, and clients.

5. **Conduct research to understand the implications of compensation policy for teacher workloads and district budgets.** For example, while advocates have proposed amending regulations under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to allow teachers overtime pay for work they do beyond 40 hours per week, we do not have empirical evidence of the likely effects of such a policy. This is likely to be a costly approach for districts, and so researchers and federal policymakers should work together to understand cost-benefit implications.



Lateef Walker participates in professional development courses to strengthen his instruction.

Technology developers: Develop products, supports, and protections that enable effective and responsible use of technology.

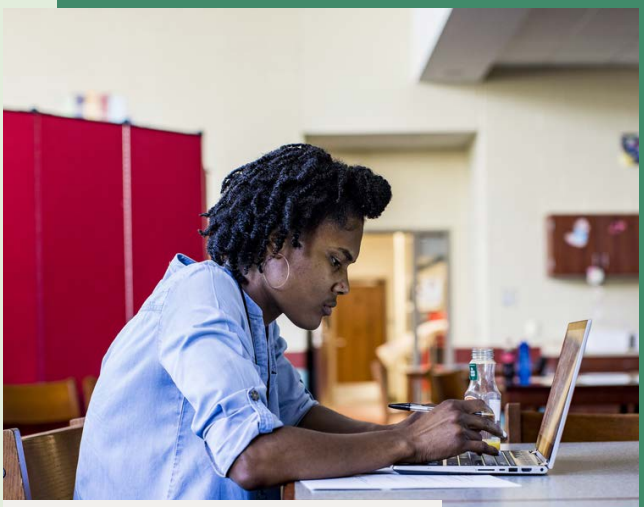
1. **Use specialized knowledge about their tools, in partnership with education experts, to provide educators and school administrators with training on best practices for AI use.** This is important not only for data security reasons, but also to ensure that teachers aren't compromising the quality of their lesson materials, feedback, or instruction. Crucially, tech developers should be transparent about where their tools might be less effective at providing high-quality supports.

2. **To broaden applicability and improve the performance of generative AI tools and other large language models not explicitly built for the education sector, work with experienced educators to incorporate expert teacher knowledge into training models.** This would ensure high-quality, well-aligned resources and feedback for educators who might use these tools for classroom resources. This is true for ed tech tools in general; developers should bring in educators as co-designers to ensure their tools' utility, accuracy, and effectiveness.

3. **Invest in technologies that improve teachers' efficiency on the job by designing and offering tools that explicitly support teachers' time use.** Tools that support planning and preparation might be particularly useful, as this represents a substantive portion of teachers' time.

4. **Create tools that support coherence.** When developing new tools or programs, or making upgrades to existing products, be aware of how different common tech tools might work together, so as to streamline technology training and use for educators. These tools should cohere with—and enhance—the broader instructional work that teachers are doing.

5. **Carefully review new and updated generative technologies to ensure compliance with education-focused data safety laws and regulations** like those defined by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), even in cases where these tools are not explicitly meant for users in the education sector (e.g., OpenAI's ChatGPT).



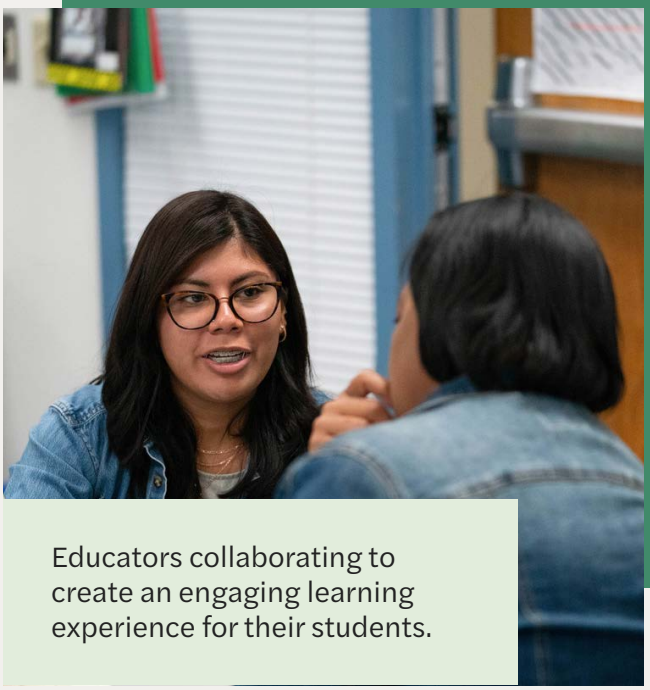
Jaranae Moody deep in concentration at Langston Hughes Academy.

Funders: Incentivize research, policy, and technology to support effective teacher time use.

1. **Provide resourcing that enable the field to learn more about teacher time use.** Bring together and financially support researcher-practitioner partnerships that generate new and more rigorous knowledge about teachers' time use. Consider supporting more detailed collection of data on how teachers use their time. Teachers' time use is a potentially powerful lever for the field to better monitor and address teacher burnout and engagement. However, we simply need more longitudinal studies specific to teachers' time use and connecting that use to these types of outcomes.

2. **Incentivize collaborations between education technology developers, districts, and researchers that build knowledge about how to measure and optimize teachers' time and actively enable better, more productive time use for educators.** Importantly, this work should also identify and promote areas for further research that might inform the development of technology that would directly support the efficiency of teachers' work.

3. **Clearly elevate the importance of teacher workloads in public discourse and in policy discussions.** While funders do not directly influence policy, private foundations can direct policy conversations based on their choice of programs to fund.



Educators collaborating to create an engaging learning experience for their students.

Third graders at Arizona Desert Elementary dive into a hands-on math activity.

Read the *full literature review*—including all citations and sources—and *learn more* about how TNTP can help you understand the demands on teachers' time and how to implement strategies that will truly support them.

This research is funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Gates Foundation.

About TNTP

As a leading education nonprofit since 1997, TNTP combines insight, courage, and action to conceive scalable solutions that address complex challenges from the classroom to the systems level. Today, we work side by side with educators, system leaders, and communities across 41 states and more than 4,000 school systems nationwide to reach ambitious goals for student success. Our vision pushes beyond school walls, catalyzing cross-sector collaboration to create pathways for young people to achieve academic, economic, and social mobility.