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DEMANDS OF TEACHING TAKING ITS TOLL ON PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

Survey Finds U.S. Teachers Are Frustrated With Testing, Changing Agendas, Lack of Influence

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Public school teachers in the United States are not a happy lot. While the profession may not be in full-blown crisis, teachers report being concerned and frustrated with shifting policies, an outsized focus on testing and a lack of voice in decision-making.

Conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP), the survey found a majority of teachers expressing satisfaction with their own school, but about half or more agreed with statements indicating diminished enthusiasm, high stress and a desire to leave the profession if they could get a higher-paying job.

Particularly striking are teachers' views about their limited impact on certain decisions affecting their professional lives. Almost half (46%) of teachers surveyed cited state or district policies that get in the way of teaching as a major challenge. About 94% of teachers said their opinions are not often factored into state or national decisions, and 77% said their voices are not often considered in district-level decisions. At the school level, however, 53% of teachers agreed that their opinions are considered most of the time.

"The last decade has been a turbulent time for many teachers," said Maria Ferguson, CEP's executive director. "Teachers seem to be growing weary of the demands being placed on them and the inability to get their voices heard."

State and district-level testing requirements also emerge as a burden for teachers and students. A majority of teachers believe they spend too much time preparing students for state-mandated tests (62%) and district-mandated tests (51%). Likewise, an overwhelming majority of teachers (81%) believe students spend too much time taking district- and/or state mandated tests. But many teachers would prefer to cut the frequency and length of state- and district-mandated tests rather than eliminate them altogether.

In addition, the vast majority of teachers (96%) report taking on leadership or student support activities beyond their regular assignments even though many are not paid for these extra tasks.

“Looking at these results, it’s not all that surprising that enrollments for teacher prep programs are dropping,” Ferguson added. “It’s becoming a tougher sell as a career.”

These and other findings are described in “*Listen to Us: Teacher Views and Voices*,” a comprehensive survey report of teacher views and attitudes. The 67-question survey included a range of questions about the current state of the teaching profession, new college- and career-ready standards and state assessments to measure mastery of the standards, time spent on testing and teacher evaluation. The survey was administered online to a nationally representative sample of public elementary, middle and high school teachers in November and December of 2015.

Among the report’s other key findings:

- Large majorities of teachers said that making a difference in students’ lives (82%) and seeing students succeed academically (69%) are among the most rewarding aspects of teaching.
- About half of public school teachers said smaller class sizes and/or more planning time would be the most helpful steps to improve their day-to-day work.
- A majority of teachers who teach their state’s math and ELA standards (57% to 73%) indicated that their autonomy over instruction, curriculum and teacher collaboration has stayed the same or increased under new, more rigorous standards.
- Most teachers received a performance evaluation in 2014-15, but only about half found the feedback they received helpful.
- Teachers’ perceptions of whether their opinions are factored into school-level decisions appear to be related to their job satisfaction. The percentages of teachers who agreed with positive statements about their profession were higher among teachers who believed they had a voice in school decisions, and lower among teachers who felt their opinions were not often considered at the school level.
- A large majority of math and ELA teachers (83%) who received spring 2015 student test data are working collaboratively with other teachers to understand the data.
- Most math (68%) and ELA teachers (71%) are using student tests results from new assessments to change how they teach at least somewhat.

“While the survey responses shine a light on the stresses teachers face, they also point to some remedies that teachers believe could improve teaching conditions,” said Diane Stark Rentner, CEP’s deputy director. “Education leaders, working hand-in-hand with teachers, can focus on key issues like testing, planning time and class size to help alleviate some of the pressures that many teachers are feeling today.”

Listen to Us contains additional insights about the nation’s teachers that are timely and important for policymakers, education leaders and the public. The report and the accompanying technical appendices can be accessed free of charge from the CEP web site at www.cep-dc.org.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.