IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING IS A RESPONSIBILITY SHARED BY POLICY makers, administrators, teachers and their federations, parents, students themselves, as well as members of the wider community. While each of these groups has important contributions to make, what teachers do mediates the effects of almost all such contributions. And what teachers do depends on their motivations, capacities, and the conditions under which they work.

Furthermore, although most contemporary efforts to improve student learning have targeted teachers’ motivations (e.g., increasing competition among schools for students) and capacities (e.g., the teaching standards movement), inadequate working conditions seriously undermine any potential these efforts may have. In Ontario, for example, the current government’s goal of increasing the proportion of elementary students achieving at least at level three on EQAO tests of literacy and math is extremely unlikely to be met in the absence of serious attention to the adequacy of teacher working conditions. As one policy maker has recently claimed, “teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions.”

To advance our understanding of the issues, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario commissioned one of the authors (Ken Leithwood) to do an analytical review of the literature on teachers’ working conditions. This resulted in the publication, Teacher Working Conditions That Matter: Evidence for Change. The framework for this report is based on the premises that teachers’ feelings and knowledge (“internal states”) are the immediate “causes” of what teachers do and that many of these internal states are significantly influenced by the circumstances in which they work. Some working conditions will have quite positive effects on one or more of these internal states, whereas some will have negative effects. Teachers’ performance will be influenced accordingly. Evidence points to the influence on teachers’ work and, in some cases, also on student learning, of eight specific internal states:

- Individual sense of professional efficacy;
- Collective sense of professional efficacy;
- Organizational commitment;
- Job satisfaction;
- Stress and burnout;
- Morale;
- Engagement or disengagement (from the school and/or profession); and
- Pedagogical content knowledge.

The analysis identifies working conditions which evidence suggests have a significant influence on each of these internal states.

OVERVIEW
The analysis is presented in four sections. Section 1 provides a detailed rationale along with the framework and methods used. Section 2 clarifies how each of the eight teacher internal states has been defined and conceptualized for purposes of research, reports evidence about its effects on teachers’ performance and student learning, and summarizes those working conditions that influence it either positively or negatively. Section 3 provides a synthesis of working conditions identified in Section 2, supplemented with evidence from largely Canadian working conditions studies sponsored by teacher unions or federations. The final section offers a number of recommendations for using the improvement of teacher working conditions as a powerful strategy for enhancing the learning of students.
During the school year, teachers work an average of 50 to 53 hours per week performing a long list of tasks. About half of that time is devoted to actual classroom instruction. Teachers’ overall attitude about the volume of their work depends on their perceptions of five more specific features of their environments. Commitments to their school and morale are eroded and feelings of stress increased when teachers perceive their workload to be unfair in comparison with the work of other teachers in their own school or across the district; when the overall number of pupils for which they are responsible becomes excessive; when the size of their classes is perceived to be unreasonable; when they are given a significant degree of autonomy over classroom decisions; this allows them to do the job the best way they know how. An atmosphere throughout the school that encourages learning improves the manageability of workload complexity, as does the availability of instructional resources.

**School-level working conditions**

Our study identified four sets of working conditions that have a significant influence on teachers’ internal states: school cultures, structures, relations with the community, and operating procedures.

**School cultures.** School culture significantly affects seven of the eight internal states (all but pedagogical content knowledge). School cultures that make increasingly positive contributions to the affective lives of teachers are those in which: the goals for teachers’ work are clear, explicit and shared; there is little conflict in teachers’ minds about what they are expected to do; the atmosphere in the school is generally positive and friendly; student discipline is under control; and collaboration among teachers is encouraged. Teachers also thrive when the cultures of their schools value and support their safety and the safety of their students and when there are high expectations for students and a strong academic “press” evident to students and teachers across the school. School cultures that help teachers to find their work meaningful (e.g., clear and morally inspiring goals) also have a positive influence on teachers’ affective dispositions.

**School structures.** The primary purpose for school structures is to make possible the development and maintenance of cultures that support the work of teachers and the learning of students. Some of the structures for which we gathered evidence are not easily altered, for example, school size and location. While our review found that the internal states and work of teachers are most likely to be enhanced in relatively small schools located in suburban rather than urban locations, little can be done about school size or location – although “schools-within-schools” is currently a popular response to large school structures.

All other structural attributes of schools associated with teachers’ internal states are potentially quite malleable, however, and can easily outweigh the negative effects of larger school sizes and urban locations. Positive contributions to teachers’ internal states and overt practices are...
associated with structures that provide opportunities to collaborate with one another (e.g., common planning times), work in small teams, prepare adequately for their classroom instruction, access ongoing professional development, and participate in school-level decisions. Physical facilities that permit teachers to use the types of instruction they judge to be most effective increase their engagement in their schools and their desire to remain in the profession; this is also the case when the school has well-developed and stable programs (the meaning of “integrity”) on which to build when new challenges present themselves.

Community relations. A third set of school-level conditions – community relations – influences both job satisfaction and the probability of remaining in the school and profession. Positive contributions to these states occur when the reputation of the school in the local community is positive and when the efforts and directions of the school enjoy the support of parents and the wider community.

School operating procedures. Finally, three working conditions at the school level, as a group, influence teachers’ sense of individual and collective efficacy, as well as job satisfaction and organizational commitment: the quality of communication in the school; how well the school’s plans for improvement match teachers’ views of what the school’s priorities should be; and regular feedback to school working groups about the focus and quality of their progress.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

We examined the influence of principals’ behaviour on teachers’ working conditions separately from other “school conditions” because this factor is so clearly distinct and its effects so alterable and significant. Principal leadership acts as a catalyst for many other school conditions. For example, collaborative cultures and the structures that support them are very hard to develop and sustain in the absence of supportive leadership from school administrators.

The review identified a substantial list of leadership practices associated, as a whole, with all eight of the teachers’ internal states. These practices are aimed at direction-setting, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program.

Direction setting. Two direction-setting practices of principals significantly influence teachers’ stress, individual sense of efficacy and organizational commitment. One of these practices, helping the staff develop an inspiring and shared sense of purpose, enhances teachers’ work. The other, holding (and expressing) unreasonable expectations, has quite negative effects.

Developing people. These practices include being collegial, considerate and supportive; listening to teachers’ ideas; and generally looking out for teachers’ welfare. Buffering teachers from distractions to their instructional work, acknowledging and rewarding good work, and providing feedback to teachers about their work also contribute to positive working conditions. Principals also assist the work of teachers when they provide them with discretionary space, distribute leadership across the school, and “practice what they preach” (model appropriate values and practices).

Redesigning the organization. In this category, only the flexible enforcement of rules was identified as having consequences for teachers.

Managing the instructional program. This category of leadership practices includes providing instructional guidance, either through some formal supervision procedure or, more importantly, by informally and frequently engaging in joint efforts with teachers to find creative ways to improve instruction. Principals also contribute to teacher satisfaction by providing resources and minimizing student disorder in the school.

Other practices. The review also identified four influential practices by principals which could not readily be classified among the four sets of core leadership practices. Principals were found to have a positive effect on teachers’ individual and collective efficacy, organizational commitment and stress levels when they were able to influence the decisions of district administrators to the benefit of the school, communicate effectively; and act in a friendly manner. Inconsistent behavior on the part of principals and frequent failure to follow through on decisions contributed to excessive teacher stress.
DISTRICT WORKING CONDITIONS

The review identified a small number of important working conditions over which districts usually have significant, if not primary, control. These conditions influence teachers’ individual efficacy, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, stress, and morale.

Professional development. Access to meaningful professional development is one of the most important working conditions a district can provide teachers, according to the evidence. To be meaningful, some of this professional development should occur at the school level, allow for teacher participation in determining content and encourage teacher-to-teacher interaction.

Salaries. Teacher salaries, typically a product of district–union negotiations, have significant effects on teachers’ internal states, in spite of the fact that teachers are among the most altruistic of occupational groups. Salaries that are noticeably lower than those in other nearby districts have a particularly significant impact on teachers’ feelings.

Demands for change. Districts are a frequent source of change – new guidelines, new standards, new programs, new forms of student assessment, and the like. Both the nature and the speed of such change can become a significant source of stress for teachers. This is the case when changes are determined with little teacher consultation and actually fly in the face of what teachers believe should be the priorities; teachers also experience dysfunctional levels of stress when they believe the timetable for implementing district changes is unrealistically short.

Size. Finally large district structures (as with class and school) are typically less able to provide such helpful conditions of work for teachers as a district-wide sense of community and differentiated allocation of resources in support of unique classroom and school improvement efforts.

All of this points to some changes that should be made to our education systems. Some are changes that teachers and principals can make to their practice, but others will need to be facilitated by structural change. Most important, we believe, is the need for policy makers to be highly strategic in the demands for change that are placed on teachers.

We believe that the time is ripe for rich dialogue about how to ensure our education system meets the needs of all students. Nothing is more important for us to accomplish. We hope that this review on teacher working conditions adds to that discussion.

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