



Understanding the Results of the West Virginia Vision for Teaching and Learning (VITAL) Survey: Initial Findings

Submitted to the West Virginia State Board of Education and Department of Education
by
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To help ensure all students can learn, teachers need to work in schools designed for their success. Positive teaching conditions, where educators are supported and empowered, is essential to creating schools where teachers want to work and can realize their greatest success with students.

To assess whether these conditions are present, West Virginia State Board of Education, under the leadership of the West Virginia Department of Education, the West Virginia Education Association and other stakeholder groups working with the New Teacher Center at the University of California at Santa Cruz, conducted a survey in February and March 2008 of all school-based licensed educators. By hearing directly from educators who intimately understand teaching and learning conditions, policymakers will have the opportunity to make data-driven decisions for developing policies that make West Virginia schools great places to work and learn.

Educators across the state have spoken out on the teaching conditions in their schools. ***Almost 10,000 West Virginia educators (43 percent) from across the state participated in the West Virginia Vision for Teaching and Learning (VITAL) Survey.*** Data—only released if at least 40 percent of the school faculty or district’s school-based licensed educators responded—is now available for almost 400 schools and 36 school districts, providing critical information for making local and state level decisions to improve West Virginia schools.

An interim report will be completed later this summer providing more in-depth analysis of the 2008 survey results and examining the responses of almost 400 principals on their ability to create positive school conditions. A final report, analyzing the findings of the survey relative to student learning and teacher retention, will be submitted in the fall. In the meantime, some general trends are already clear in the state survey results.

Overall, West Virginia educators are generally satisfied with their school. More than three-quarters (78 percent) agree that their school is a good place to work and learn. Almost half (49 percent) strongly agree and less than one in ten (8 percent) strongly disagree. Educators were positive throughout the survey about the resources available to them and the support provided by school leadership.

Given these feelings, few survey takers indicated that they wanted to leave their school or education altogether. More than four out of five teachers want to remain in their current school

(82 percent), while 5 percent indicate that they want to continue teaching, but in a different school or district, 6 percent want to leave teaching but remain in education and 7 percent want to leave education entirely.

Teaching conditions appear to be important factors influencing educator employment plans according to survey respondents. Adequate support from school leadership (52 percent strongly agree), effectiveness with students (50 percent strongly agree), adequate support from school leadership, teaching assignment (49 percent strongly agree), comfort with the students taught (48 percent strongly agree), student behavior (42 percent strongly agree) and collegial atmosphere (42 percent strongly agree) were the strongest influences on decision making about future professional plans; more so than salary (35 percent strongly agree), quality of life in the community (29 percent strongly agree), and degree of testing and accountability (25 percent strongly agree).

Leadership

1. School leadership is supportive in many arenas, but may need to do more to address concerns about teaching and learning conditions

When asked which teaching condition most affects your willingness to remain teaching at your school, one-third (36 percent) of West Virginia educators indicated that school leadership was the most critical, more than any other area. Fortunately, educators are positive about several aspects of school leadership. Almost two-thirds (61 percent) believe that the school leadership in their building is effective and that the faculty senate provides effective leadership (68 percent).

This is seen in several areas of the survey.

- Educators believe that they work in supportive environments where there is an atmosphere of trust (67 percent), that teachers can raise issues and concerns that are important to them (66 percent) and consistently get support when needed (68 percent).
- Educators believe that expectations are clear and well communicated. Almost nine in ten educators (88 percent) believe the faculty is committed to helping every student learn and two-thirds agree that school leadership communicates clear expectations to students and parents (60 percent). More than two-thirds (69 percent) believe that the leadership effectively communicates policies.

There are some concerns about the ability of school leadership to address teacher concerns about teaching conditions. Over half of educators believe that sustained efforts are made to improve leadership (56 percent), teacher empowerment (59 percent) and the use of time (64 percent), the areas of greatest concern to educators in making future employment plans.

Decision Making

2. Teachers want more influence on decisions about their school

Teacher empowerment is viewed as critical to teacher success with students and their future employment decisions. One-third (33 percent) of educators believe teacher empowerment is the most important teaching condition in promoting student learning (28 percent), more than any other area surveyed. West Virginia educators, however, do not feel engaged in education decision making in several important areas.

- Less than half (46 percent) of educators believe that teachers are centrally involved in decision making about educational issues. While almost three-quarters of educators believe that steps are taken to solve problems in their school (70 percent), fewer (62 percent) agree that there is an effective process for making collaborative decisions.
- A majority of educators agree that teachers play a large or primary role in several important areas related to professional practice such as designing and delivering instruction including selecting instructional materials (46 percent), devising teaching techniques (58 percent) and assessment practices (47 percent). But teachers are not influencing other decisions that impact their classroom and school. Half or more of educators indicate that teachers play a small role or no role at all in selecting in-service professional development programs (50 percent), providing input on the school budget (62 percent), or the selection of new teachers (86 percent). While one-third of educators note that teachers play a large or primary role in school improvement planning (33 percent), more than half (55 percent) indicate teachers are influential in Faculty Senate planning and decision making.

Resources

3. Teachers believe they need more time to plan and work with colleagues

Only four out of ten educators (41 percent) believe that the non-instructional time—time without student contact that could be used for planning, meetings, etc—teachers receive is sufficient and that teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues (43 percent). Several issues identified within the survey help illuminate these time concerns.

- About one-third (30 percent) of West Virginia educators report receiving, on average, an hour per day of non-instructional time and 33 percent receive three hours or less. Time available for collaboration is scarce. More than one-third (38 percent) report no collaborative time at all in an average week and 9 in ten teachers (86 percent) receive three hours or less.
- About half of teachers (54 percent) believe they are protected from duties that interfere with educating students

4. Teachers are generally positive about the resources they have to support instruction

About three-quarters of West Virginia educators believe that teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials (76 percent), instructional technology (70 percent), office equipment and supplies (77 percent) and communication technology (72 percent). Almost eight in ten (79 percent) West Virginia educators believe that their school environment is safe.

Professional Development

5. Professional development is viewed positively, but does not appear to be meeting the most pressing needs of West Virginia educators

About half of educators (56 percent) report that there are sufficient resources for teachers to take advantage of professional development and that ultimately it provides teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective (57 percent).

West Virginia educators were most likely to indicate a need for professional development to close the achievement gap (38 percent) and more effectively teach special education students (33 percent), yet few educators received at least ten hours of support over the past two years in these areas (23 percent and 20 percent respectively). In no survey areas did more than half of educators indicate that they received 10 hours of more of professional development in the past two years.

About two-thirds of West Virginia teachers (68 percent) report that they have incorporated strategies from professional development into their instructional delivery and it has proven useful in improving student achievement (62 percent). Only half of educators (53 percent), however, indicate that professional development offerings are data-driven.

6. New teachers receiving additional support found it helpful

Almost 1,100 beginning educators—those with three years of teaching experience or less—answered specific questions about the support they receive. Seven out of ten new teachers (71 percent) report that they have been formally assigned a mentor.

- Of those receiving a mentor, about three-quarters believed it improved their effectiveness in following school and district procedures and required documentation (70 percent), development classroom management and discipline strategies (71 percent) and instructional strategies (71 percent). Eight out of ten (83 percent) agree that their mentor provided effective social support and encouragement.
- But this support does not appear to be systematically in place across the state. Of those 71 percent of new teachers assigned a mentor, more than one-third report never planning instruction with their mentor (39 percent), planning with their mentor during the school day (33 percent), or being observed by their mentor (49 percent).

Given these inconsistencies, less than half (41 percent) of new teachers assigned a mentor agreed that it was an important factor in their decision to continue teaching at their current school.

The West Virginia VITAL survey data can help the state, districts, and schools assess, understand and improve their teaching and learning conditions in order to foster improved perceptions, motivations and performance in schools. Ultimately this can create positive school environments where all educators are supported, want to work and can thrive.