



A Research  
Brief:  
**August 2023**

# **Teacher Working Conditions in Districts Serving High- and Low- Income Areas**

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AUGUST 2023

# Research Brief: Teacher Working Conditions in High- and Low-Income Districts and Schools

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## INTRODUCTION

High- and low-income school districts vary in the qualities of their teachers' working conditions, with low-income school districts typically offering more challenging working conditions relative to higher-income districts. While these disparities stem in part from lower average pay in low-income-districts, important dimensions of teacher working conditions include school climate, parental/community support, student behavior, and administrative support. As a result of inexperienced leadership, stressful work environments, and what educators sometimes consider challenging student populations, teachers in low-income districts report poorer working conditions and are more likely to turn over because of these conditions.

## ELEMENTS OF TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS

Research on teacher working conditions considers different dimensions of teachers' experiences and places these in the context of how they impact teacher job satisfaction and retention. Early research on this topic examined student characteristics as an element of teachers working conditions and found that working in schools with a higher concentration of students of color and/or economically disadvantaged students predicts higher teacher turnover. However, recent work that more directly measures teachers' working conditions has found that they play a stronger role in teachers' decisions around turnover than student characteristics (Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011).

Teacher surveys on working conditions reveal common factors that shape teachers' intent to turn over as well as their actual turnover behavior. Organizational factors that predict teacher turnover include (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001; Simon & Johnson, 2015):

- School culture: strengths of the organizational climate, quality of relationships, and collegiality among staff
- Administrative support: the degree to which teachers perceive that administrators encourage and acknowledge staff
- Decision-making power: whether teachers feel included and/or empowered in school-wide decisions
- Student behavior and discipline: whether student behavior impedes teachers' abilities to provide instruction
- School resources and salaries: whether schools provide adequate compensation and financial support to teachers for instructional materials

While researchers have identified other aspects of teacher working conditions, these five areas are the most frequently cited by teachers as determinants of turnover in their schools (Borman & Dowling, 2008). In addition, these factors are often correlated, meaning that schools where teachers report higher levels of one dimension also tend to have higher levels of the other factors (Johnson et al., 2012).

## TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS RESEARCH

### School Culture

Ratings of school culture and collegiality among peers represent highly relevant predictors of teacher satisfaction and turnover. When teachers feel that their school communities have trust and that teachers are collegial, teacher retention is higher (Johnson et al., 2012; Toropova et al., 2021). In Massachusetts, teachers who rated their relationships with their colleagues one standard deviation more positively were 56% less likely to express thoughts of leaving their schools. Similarly, a one standard deviation increase in school culture ratings was also associated with a 62% decrease in thoughts of turnover (Johnson et al., 2012).<sup>1</sup> Teachers in low-income schools report lower ratings of collegiality and school culture, which could exacerbate retention issues in these schools (Johnson et al., 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

### Administrative Support

Researchers have also identified perceived administrative support as another important element of teacher working conditions. This is typically defined in terms of whether teachers feel that their principals are communicative and whether their administration is encouraging (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017). In North Carolina, teachers who rated school leadership one standard deviation more positively were 30-40% less likely to express that they planned to exit teaching (Ladd, 2011).<sup>3</sup> One study found that exiting novice teachers consistently reported “principals who were arbitrary, abusive, and neglectful,” which supports the view that principals can have outsized influences on teachers’ decisions to stay (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 594).

Principals in low-income school districts are disproportionately more likely to be rated as ineffective (Grissom, 2011). At the same time, the impacts of highly effective principals on teacher turnover appear to be the strongest in low-income schools (Burkhouser, 2017; Grissom, 2011). This implies that there could be large benefits to assigning highly effective principals to low-income schools.

### Decision-Making Power

Similar to administrative support, research has demonstrated that greater teacher decision-making power around school policy is also associated with decreased teacher turnover. When teachers believe they can influence school policy, they are significantly more likely to stay in their schools (Jackson, 2012; Johnson et al., 2012; Rave et al., 2022). Conversely, another study found that for each percentage point increase in teachers’ ratings of principals’ influence, teachers were 19% more likely to leave the school (Jackson, 2012). This suggests that principals who elevate teachers’ voices in school decisions can encourage teachers to stay in their schools while those whose

leadership style tends to exclude teachers can create an environment that encourages teachers to leave.

## Student Discipline

Student behavior represents another key aspect of teacher working conditions. Whether teachers have difficulty maintaining classroom order is an important stressor, and this can impact teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Bottiani et al., 2019; Dicke et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2012; Ingersoll, 2001). One study that examined student discipline issues found that an increase in the number of reported student discipline problems was associated with a 47% increase in the odds of a teacher departing (Ingersoll, 2001). In addition, perceptions of poor student discipline may impact teachers' perceptions of other working conditions as well (Weiss, 1999). Low-income school districts consistently report more student discipline infractions (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). While this may be due to underlying structural issues by which students of color are more likely to be reported than White students, these higher rates of disciplinary infractions can impact perceptions of school culture and teacher morale (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Weiss, 1999).

## School Resources

The availability of school resources including school supplies, instructional materials, and teacher salaries has also been identified as an important determinant of teacher working conditions (Betoret, 2009). These aspects of working environments tend to mitigate the effects of stressors and distractions for teachers (Betoret, 2009). In addition, increasing instructional expenditures is associated with decreased teacher attrition, and these increases were over five times more effective at reducing attrition rates in low-income schools (Borman & Dowling, 2008). This has led some researchers to argue that teachers might respond more readily to improved school culture and administrative supports than increased salaries or improved school facilities (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson et al., 2012).

# TEACHERS IN LOW-INCOME SCHOOLS FACE POORER WORKING CONDITIONS

Teachers turn over at higher rates in low-income schools relative to more advantaged schools, and growing evidence suggests that low-income schools tend to have poorer working environments than comparatively more affluent schools (Ladd, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2015). This disparity between high and low-income schools is driven by interrelated issues. A lack of resources can make it difficult for schools to attract and retain teachers, and this can lead to higher rates of turnover. Subsequently, higher rates of turnover may make it difficult for administrators to develop school culture (Johnson et al., 2012). In addition, low-income students and students of color are

disproportionately more likely to be reported for disciplinary issues (Simon & Johnson, 2012), and this reporting discrepancy could add to the perception that low-income schools have poor work environments (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). Collectively, these issues create a cycle that makes it more difficult for low-income schools to develop and sustain strong school cultures that promote student success (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Johnson et al. 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

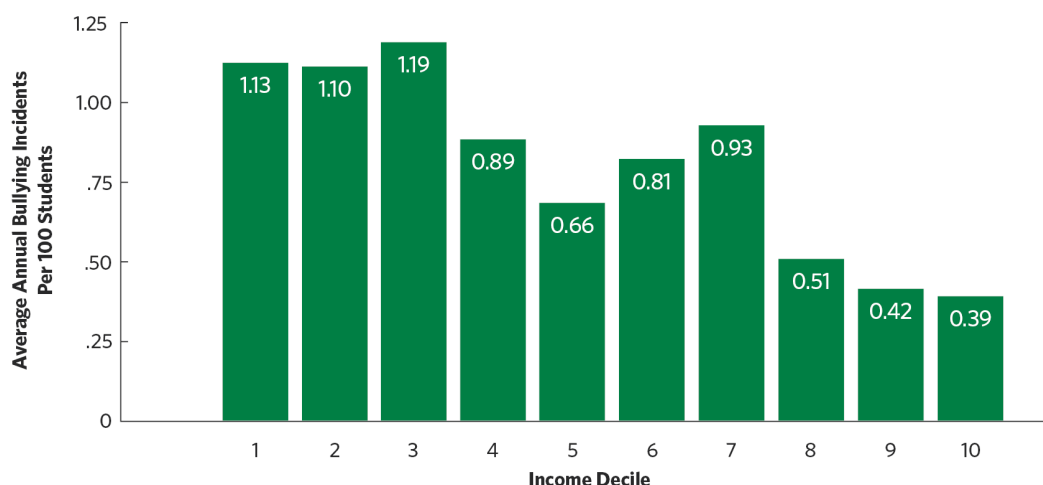
Some have argued that the working conditions in low-income schools are the key drivers of teacher turnover, which implies that teacher turnover should be addressed differently in low-income schools than in high-income schools (Johnson et al., 2012). For example, research has suggested that policymakers consider installing highly effective principals in low-income schools (Jackson, 2012), providing professional development that targets improving student discipline (Dicke et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2012), and developing parent-teacher relationships (Kraft et al., 2016). These researchers posit that policymakers should aim to improve teacher retention in low-income schools by placing more emphasis on identifying effective school leaders, elevating teacher voices, and facilitating professionalism among teachers that will serve to retain high quality teachers in those schools.

## TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS IN MICHIGAN

In Michigan, teacher working conditions, and their relationship with teacher turnover, are like those in other states. In Michigan, low-income school districts report higher proportions of novice teachers and higher rates of teacher turnover relative to non-low-income districts (Hopkins et al., 2021; Mauriello & Higgins, 2022). In addition, a study from the Michigan Education Association found that Michigan teachers in both rural and urban schools face challenging working conditions, leading the organization to push lawmakers to pass legislation that empowers teachers to bargain for improved working conditions and that protects teachers from unfair treatment by administrators (Herbart, 2023).

One dimension of teacher working conditions in Michigan is illustrated in Figure 1. This graph presents the average number of reported incidents of bullying per capita in Michigan, which serves as a proxy for student discipline. Low-income districts, represented by the bars on the left side of the figure, tend to report higher rates of bullying, which could shape perceptions of poor working conditions in these schools.

Figure 1: Average Annual Bullying Incidents Per 100 Students in Michigan School Districts by Household Income Decile, 2021-2022



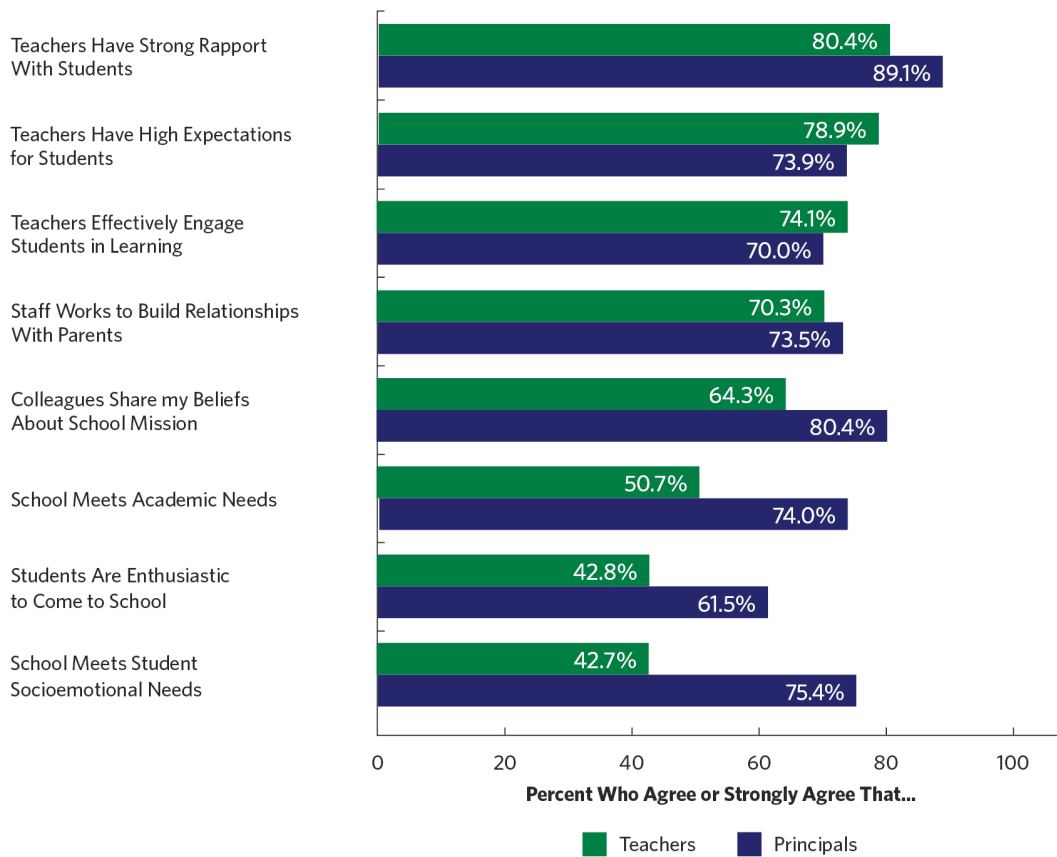
*Note: Income deciles represent median household income at the district level, ranked from lowest to highest, with each decile containing 10% of households. For example, the first decile is the 10% of school districts with the lowest median household income, the fifth and sixth deciles represent middle income districts, and the tenth decile is comprised of the wealthiest districts.*

*Source: Author collected from MISchoolData.org and American Community Survey (ACS) data. Bullying incidents reflect the average number of total reported number of bullying incidents divided by the total number of students in each district, multiplied by 100. ACS income estimates are drawn from 2017-2021 ACS survey.*

Recent evidence from Michigan Partnership schools, the schools identified for turnaround by the state's accountability system, aligns with the macro-level patterns noted above in some respects but breaks from them in important ways. Contrary to the characterization of low-income schools having poor working conditions, educators in Partnership schools report increased administrative support since the inception of the Partnership model (Strunk et al. 2022). Principals in these schools place strong emphasis on supporting teachers, and teachers tend to focus their efforts on parent engagement as well (Strunk et al., 2021), shown in Figure 2. While principals consistently report more positive perceptions of school climate than teachers, both groups tend to report high levels of positive working conditions. In another study of the districts that operate Michigan's Partnership schools, teachers in schools with more positive working conditions in the areas of school climate, effective leadership, goal buy-in, school safety, and student behavior were less likely to consider leaving their school and less likely to actually leave their school (Harbatkin et al., 2023).



**Figure 2: Partnership District Educator Perceptions of School Climate and Culture, 2021-2022**



*Source: Survey of educators in Michigan's Partnership (comprehensive support and improvement) districts. Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about their school's climate and culture.*

*Reproduced with permission from the EPIC Partnership Turnaround: Year 4 Report (Strunk et al., 2022, p. 98).*

Working conditions can have a powerful influence on whether teachers choose to leave or remain in their school. Though the concept of working conditions can be broad, the elements most strongly related to teacher retention include teachers' perceptions of relationships within their school, administrative support, inclusion in decision-making, student behavior and discipline, and the adequacy of financial and material resources. Teachers who experience more positive working conditions form a stronger bond with their school and are less likely to turn over. Working conditions tend to be more challenging in low-income schools, though strategic actions by leaders and policymakers can help to improve working conditions, and in turn increase teacher retention, in disadvantaged schools.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Community support has also emerged as an important aspect of school culture, and some researchers have found that improved community support is also correlated with improved student outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Johnson et al., 2012).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, low-income schools may have accountability requirements for teachers. Research indicates that these requirements can have a negative effect on school culture as well (Ryan et al., 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Estimates ranged from 3-4 percentage points depending on the model specification.

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