



CHAPTER 4:

How teachers spent their summer break

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This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009* survey.
For additional information, see www.bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx.

**WORKLIFE OF
BC TEACHERS
2009**



Table of contents

Introduction	1
Taking time off during the summer break	1
• Variations by gender, age, and teaching experience	2
• <i>What teachers say</i>	3
School-related or employment activities teachers spent time on during the summer break.....	5
Time spent in the summer completing year-end tasks and preparing for the next school year	6
• Completing year-end tasks.....	6
• <i>What teachers say</i>	7
• Preparation for the upcoming school year	7
• <i>What teachers say</i>	8
Time spent working in paid employment during the summer break	10
• Teaching summer school	10
• Other education-related employment.....	10
• Employment not related to teaching	11
• <i>What teachers say</i>	11
Time spent working on professional upgrading during the summer break	12
• Taking educational courses.....	12
• Reading education journals/books	12
• Taking district-based PD.....	13
• <i>What teachers say</i>	13
Time spent volunteering during the summer break	14
• <i>What teachers say</i>	14
Time spent on other work or work-related activities	15
• <i>What teachers say</i>	15
Changes to the school calendar that would affect the summer break.....	16
• <i>What teachers say</i>	16
Changes since the summer of 2000, where comparable.....	17
Summary	18

List of charts and tables

Charts

Chart 1: Time spent “taking a break” during the 2008 summer break	1
Chart 2: Percentage of teachers who spent time on this activity	5
Chart 3: Completing year-end tasks.....	6
Chart 4: Preparing for the upcoming school year	7
Chart 5: Teaching summer school	10
Chart 6: Other education-related employment.....	10
Chart 7: Non-teaching employment.....	11
Chart 8: Taking educational courses.....	12
Chart 9: Reading education journals/books	12
Chart 10: Taking district PD.....	13
Chart 11: Volunteering	14
Chart 12: Other work-related activity	15

Tables

Table 1: Number of weeks teachers spent “taking a break,” by gender	1
Table 2: Number of weeks spent “taking a break” during the 2008 summer break	2
Table 3: Average weeks spent on each activity during the summer break	6
Table 4: Time spent taking a break.....	17
Table 5: Type of activity teachers engaged in during the 2000 and 2008 summer breaks	17

Introduction

This section of the study examines how much time teachers took as a break during the summer of 2008, and what types of activities they spent time on during the summer break, including various types of professional upgrading, completing year-end tasks, preparing for the upcoming school year, working in paid employment, and volunteer activities. Teachers involved in these tasks also indicated the amount of time they spent on each task.

Teachers made extensive comments about how they spent their time during the summer break in the space provided on the questionnaire. This report presents a descriptive analysis of these comments, integrating the themes and illustrative quotes into the relevant sections of the paper.

Taking time off during the summer break

Of the 563 teachers who completed the survey, 412 teachers provided information on how much time they spent taking a break (e.g., vacation or time off) during the 2008 summer break. On average, these teachers took 5.7 weeks off during the break between June 30 and September 2, 2008. Only five teachers (1% of respondents) took no break during the summer months (Table 1). Chart 1 shows that about one-third of teachers took a break for seven or more weeks and one in five teachers took a break for three or fewer weeks during the 2008 summer break.

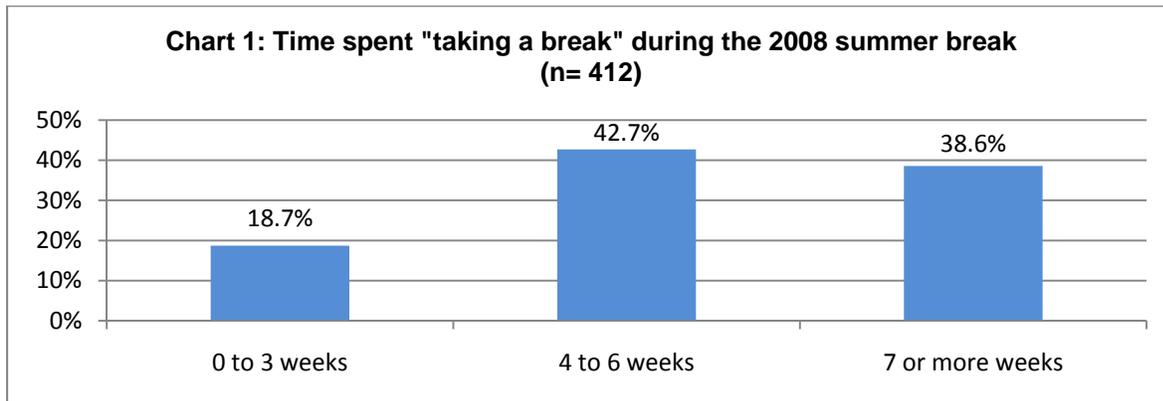


Table 1: Number of weeks teachers spent "taking a break," by gender

	% Female teachers	% Male teachers	% all respondents (n=408)
0 weeks	1.0%	2.2%	1.2%
1 week	3.2%	1.1%	2.7%
2 weeks	7.5%	5.4%	7.1%
3 weeks	6.8%	7.5%	6.9%
4 weeks	12.7%	10.8%	12.0%
5 weeks	11.4%	9.7%	11.0%
6 weeks	19.5%	21.5%	20.3%
7 weeks	16.2%	11.8%	15.0%
8 weeks	17.9%	24.7%	19.4%
9 weeks	2.3%	1.1%	2.2%
10 weeks	1.6%	4.3%	2.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Variations by gender, age, and teaching experience

Gender

Overall, gender does not appear to make a difference in determining the amount of time teachers took as a break during the summer of 2008 (Table 2).

Age

Age does make a difference, especially at the ends of the age continuum. About one-third (35%) of teachers under 35 years took a break for zero to three weeks compared to 13% of teachers 55 years or older. The percentage of teachers taking seven or more weeks off during the summer increased steadily with age, from 26% for teachers under 35 years to 47% for teachers 55 years or older (Table 2).

Years of teaching experience

The difference in the amount of time teachers took as a break during the summer of 2008 is even more pronounced by years of teaching experience. Table 2 shows that only 6% of teachers with less than five years' teaching experience took seven or more weeks' break compared to 50% of teachers with over 25 years' experience. In contrast, 63% of teachers with less than five years' experience took a break for 0 to 3 weeks, while 13% of teachers with 25 or more years of experience did so.

Table 2 also shows that as teaching experience increases, the proportion of teachers taking a break for 0 to 3 weeks during the summer steadily decreases for the first 15 years of teaching. About two-thirds (63%) of teachers with less than five years' experience took a break of 0 to 3 weeks, decreasing to 9% of teachers with 10 to 14 years' teaching experience.

Table 2: Number of weeks spent "taking a break" during the 2008 summer break

Characteristic	Number of weeks taking a break		
	0 to 3	4 to 6	7 or more
Gender			
Female	19%	43%	38%
Male	17%	42%	42%
Age			
Under 35 years	35%	40%	26%
35 to 44 years	21%	49%	30%
45 to 54 years	14%	41%	45%
55 and over	13%	39%	47%
Teaching experience			
Less than 5 years	63%	31%	6%
5 to 9 years	21%	43%	36%
10 to 14 years	9%	61%	30%
15 to 19 years	19%	41%	40%
20 to 24 years	17%	38%	45%
Over 25 years	13%	37%	50%
All respondents (n=412)	18.7%	42.7%	38.6%

What teachers say...

Recovering from the demands of the school year

Analysis of respondents' comments reveals that teachers spent part of the summer recovering from a hectic school year and attending to their personal and family needs. Several of the comments reflected the exhaustion some teachers feel at the start of summer break, and the need for time to recuperate. For some teachers, it took up to two weeks to catch up on sleep and recover their energy:

“Completing the reports for year-end files always goes into the summer. Then there is the sleep factor, trying to catch up from lack of sleep over the year takes two weeks at least. After that it feels like I am ready to have a holiday.”

“By the end of June, I am beat. It takes at least the first two weeks to feel human and relaxed again.”

But some teachers needed much more time and seemed under greater stress:

“I was sick for a big part of the summer, so it was difficult to do my normal amount of anything. It took a long time to recover from my difficult class.”

“I have to take a break during the summer because I am exhausted. It takes the month of July to recuperate and then it's almost time to start preparing for the next year.”

“I'm usually so exhausted in July that it's hard for me to relax. It's difficult to transition from high structure to no structure. I often have a dip in mood until I adapt.”

“I used to start planning September by the time August 1 came around. Now, I feel only stress that September is closing in. It has gotten to the point where I hate the stress of June so much I usually get sick the first week of July.”

Several teachers expressed the view that it was important for teachers to take the summer break off:

“I believe in the word ‘break’. I do not go near the school until one day before the year begins. In the past I have taken educational courses but I'm done now.”

“I feel quite strongly that the summer should be a full and complete break from work. During the year, I am completely submerged; I do very little outside of work activities. The summer is when I live the other part of my life!”

A few teachers nearing retirement voiced their thoughts on taking time off during the summer break:

“I am close to retirement so I no longer teach summer school and take courses during the summer. In the past I have only had about two weeks' break in the summer. Time to take it easy.”

“As an experienced teacher, I've given up enough summers to my profession. I've marked provincial exams, gone on PD, taught summer school, and prepped for new courses. Since I intend to retire in five years, and have become quite tired, I've decided to take the time I need to regenerate.”

Restoring work/life balance

Many of the teachers' comments reveal that much of the time they take off in the summer is spent restoring work/life balance and taking care of family responsibilities. Teachers spent time "catching up" on the many personal and family needs that were put on hold during the school year:

"I try to maximize my personal time in the summer and crazily try to catch up on all the things that need to be done for my home/yard/family that I don't have time for during the school year."

"Summer is for catching up on my life. All the personal stuff there is no time for during the school year."

"Taking a break includes looking after my family's needs, medical, dental, eye appointments that we don't have time to do during the school year."

"Does this mean relaxation time? Much of my summer is used to get things in order at home which get put on the back burner during the school year."

The comments also indicate that some teachers spent the summer break in a care-giving role, whether that is for children, grandchildren, or elderly parents:

"Caregiver for my mother while my caregiver takes holidays."

"I have three young children and my husband works full-time. My 'taking a break' is being a full-time, active, involved, educated parent!!"

"I often volunteer working with children in summer programs but due to personal situation (separation, child care of grandchildren, etc.) spent little time in educational endeavours."

"A family illness last summer resulted in me having no real break."

Some teachers described the things they did to address work/life balance and improve their sense of well-being:

"I definitely need the time off to relax, travel, garden, see friends again, etc. I am always on the look-out for ideas/planning in my head, though."

"I enjoy my summers much more now that I have children. I used to spend much more time preparing."

School-related or employment activities teachers spent time on during the summer break

Another aspect of teacher workload is the amount of time teachers spend on teaching-related activities or other employment during the summer break. The survey asked teachers, “During last summer break (2008), how much time did you spend on the following activities?”

Chart 2 shows that the activities the most teachers indicated spending time on were preparing for the upcoming school year (77.8%), completing year-end tasks (59.5%), and reading education journals and/or books (44.3%).

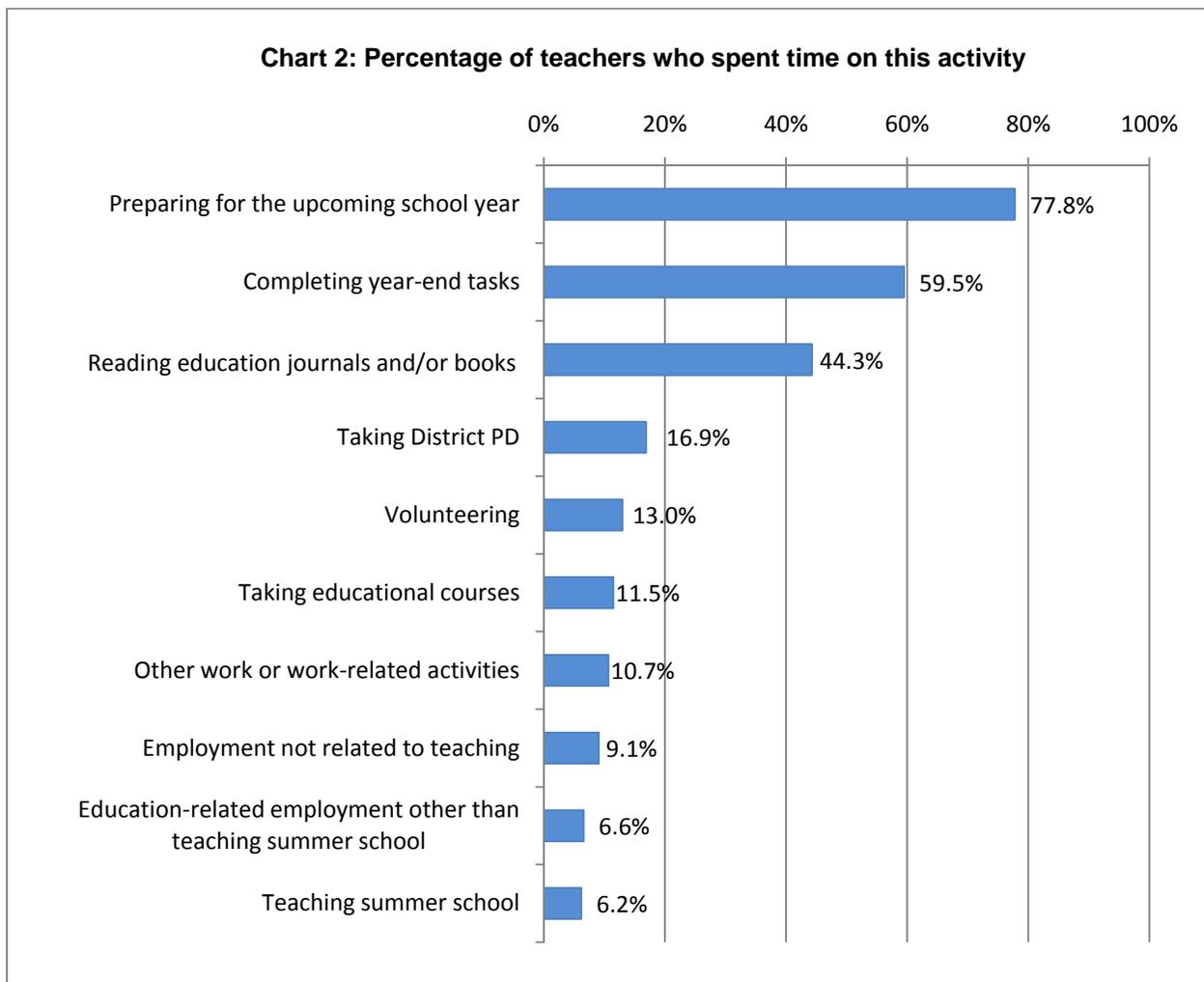


Table 3 shows the average weeks worked on each activity and the number of teachers doing each activity. Of these activities, working in paid employment involved the most time during the summer break. Teachers who worked in paid employment during the summer spent an average of 4.2 weeks teaching summer school, 3.8 weeks in non-teaching employment, and/or 2.9 weeks in other education-related employment.

Table 3: Average weeks* spent on each activity during the summer break (highest to lowest)

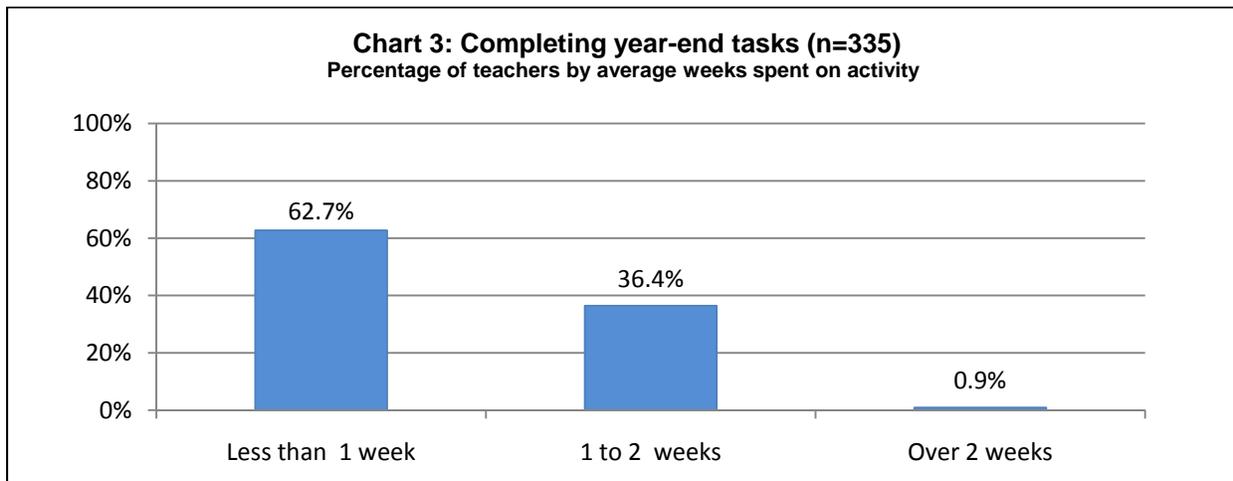
Activity – Summer break	Average weeks worked	Number of teachers who indicated engaging in the activity
Teaching summer school	4.2	35
Employment not related to teaching	3.8	51
Other education-related employment	2.9	37
Taking educational courses	2.5	65
Volunteering	1.5	73
Other work or work-related activities	1.5	60
Reading education journals/books	1.3	249
Prep for the upcoming school year	1.2	438
Completing year-end tasks	0.7	335
Taking PD	0.6	95

* 1 week=5 working days

Time spent in the summer completing year-end tasks and preparing for the next school year

Completing year-end tasks

The vast majority of the 335 teachers who spent time during their summer break completing year-end tasks did so within a two-week period. About two-thirds (62.7%) spent less than one week on this task.



What teachers say...

Many teachers spent time before the start of the school year setting up classrooms:

“Cleaning and reorganizing classroom before the new school year consumes a lot of time; renovations to ceiling left classroom in disarray.”

In addition to the usual end-of-year tasks, teachers who were changing grades, schools, or course assignments had the additional job of cleaning out the classroom. For some, this took a considerable amount of effort and time:

“I had to change schools because of a change in programs. After 19 years at the old school I had a lot of materials. It has taken me most of summer 2007 and half of 2008 summer to downsize to fit in my new classroom.”

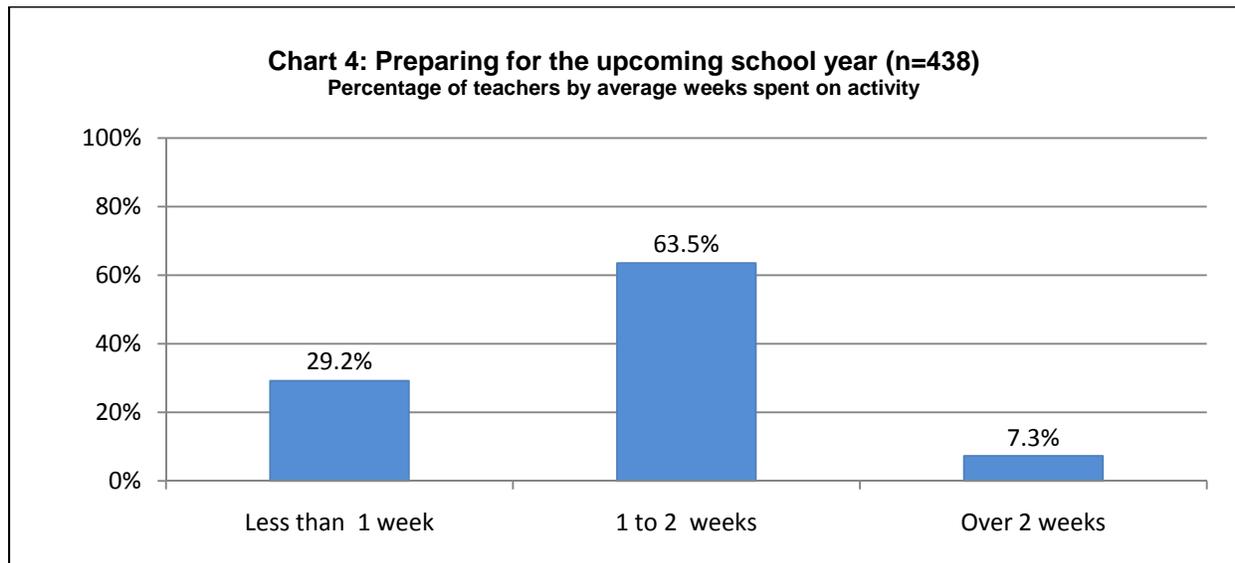
“Dismantling the classroom for summer clean-up and reassembling the room takes a lot of time and work.”

The following example illustrates the additional stress experienced by teachers when their workload increased significantly due to changing schools or grades taught:

“Every year since 2000 I get laid off and placed in a new school, grade, job. It is a ton of work to pack up, move, unpack, and prepare for a totally new grade. Plus get to know new parents, students, staff, and admin every year; very exhausting.”

Preparation for the upcoming school year

As Chart 2 (p. 5) indicates, most teachers (78%) spent time during the summer break preparing for the upcoming school year. Of those 438 teachers who did so, 29.2% spent less than one week, and 63.5% spent one to two weeks preparing for the next school year (Chart 4).



What teachers say...

Teachers had a lot to say about the time they spent in the summer months preparing for the upcoming school year. The comments indicate that some teachers spent considerable time during the summer break preparing for new courses:

“I spent two intensive weeks preparing a secondary French program from scratch.”

“I taught international students English for our district. I changed from intermediate to primary and had to prep for new grades.”

“If I know that I am teaching a new course for the upcoming year, I review the entire course program over the summer break. I may spend two to three weeks to prepare unit plans.”

Specialty programs may also require teachers to do extra preparation in the summer break:

“Much of the summer break is spent on preparing for the following year...and with IB [International Baccalaureate], there is also marking that sometimes needs to be completed.”

“Specialty-course teachers spend a lot of time sourcing and ordering supplies for September during the summer.”

One teacher’s comment suggests that the lack of textbooks, resulting from funding inadequacies, may be increasing the amount of time teachers spend preparing curriculum materials:

“I have reached the point of resenting spending about half my summer on school-related issues. Part of the prep time is spent setting up assignments/projects to help cover the course requirements due to a lack of textbooks. I do not have enough textbooks for each child to have a Science or reading book. I am using antiquated Socials texts so each child has a book.”

Many teachers indicated spending time at the end of August preparing for the upcoming school year on such activities as preparing lesson plans, planning field trips, and conducting interviews with parents of Kindergarten students:

“The last week of August in the school during day hours prepping lesson plans, activities for my teaching team, setting up intro activities, prepping course previews and overviews, timetabling, etc.”

“I chose to do parent-child interviews (including screening/observation of child) before school begins in the fall. The information is very useful and the interview experience gives the child an opportunity to meet me and view his/her classroom before the big step of entering Kindergarten.”

Last-minute changes to course or grade assignments makes it hard to prepare

The following quotes illustrate the frustration some teachers experience due to the instability of teaching assignments for the next school year, with last-minute changes in grades or courses making it difficult to prepare curriculum over the summer break:

“Yes, I spend time collecting my materials together, and yes, I spend a lot of time trying to figure out next year. Although, at our school, grades assigned can change, making all that hard work down the tubes.”

“As a counsellor, we come one week early to do programming. We must also prepare for whichever teaching block we are given, little choice. We must take whatever is left over, requiring substantial prep for courses we’ve never taught before.”

Some teachers stopped preparing curriculum during the summer break due to the frustration of having done so in the past, only to have their grade assignments changed in September:

“I try to avoid preparing for the next year because it is my experience that job assignments can and do change even in September. I have spent time and money preparing to teach certain subjects when the curriculum has changed only to have the grade level change. Thousands of dollars are spent subsidizing the education system and that money is not even tax deductible.

“I have refused to work without pay. In the past I’ve spent one to two weeks in August prepping only to have my grade changed. They get enough of my own time during the year with extra-curricular meetings.”

Several teachers without permanent teaching contracts commented that they were unable to do curriculum preparation during the summer break due to the uncertainty of their employment situation:

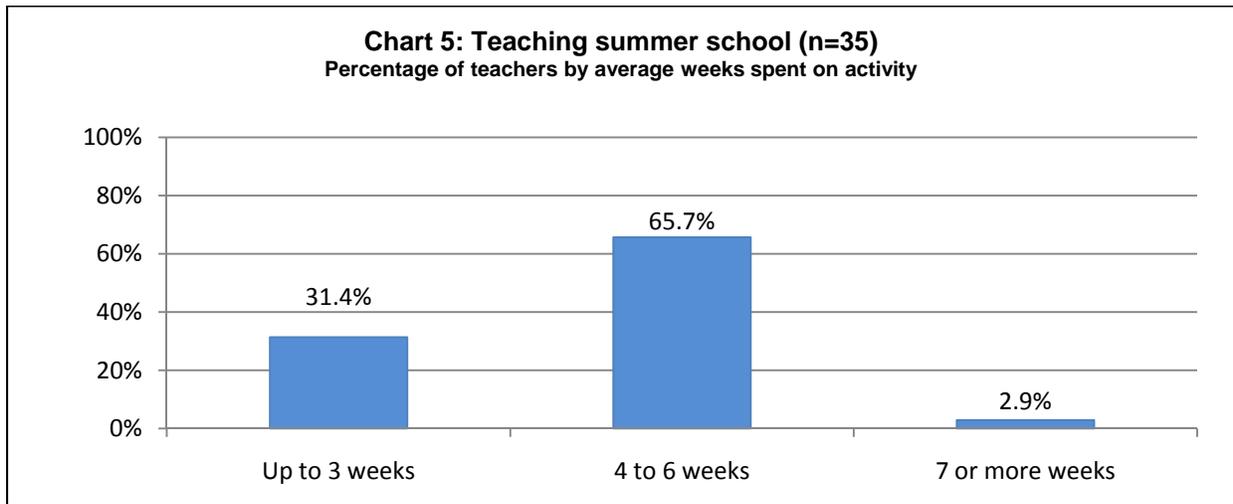
“The past two years final job assignments were not given until late August or early September, so unable to spend time preparing. Makes for a very hectic September”

“I finished my contract last June and did not work again until the school year started. I did not get a new contract until the end of September 2008, so nothing to prep for during the summer because I had no clue what or where I would be teaching.”

Time spent working in paid employment during the summer break

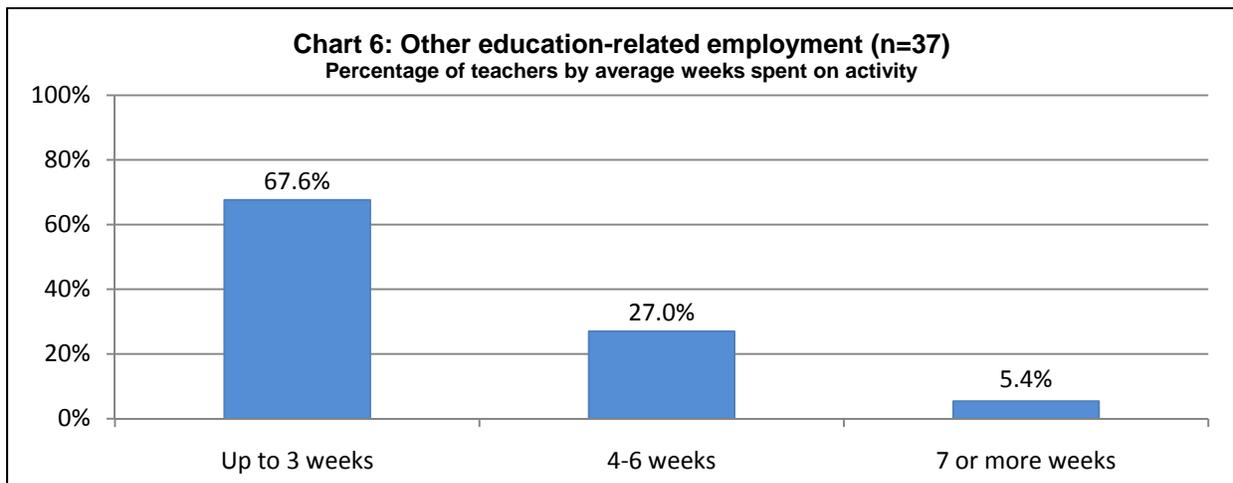
Teaching summer school

Of the 35 respondents who indicated they taught summer school over the summer break, about one-third (31.4%) spent up to three weeks teaching summer school. Another two-thirds of these teachers spent four to six weeks teaching summer school, spending a considerable amount of their summer break in this type of employment (Chart 5).



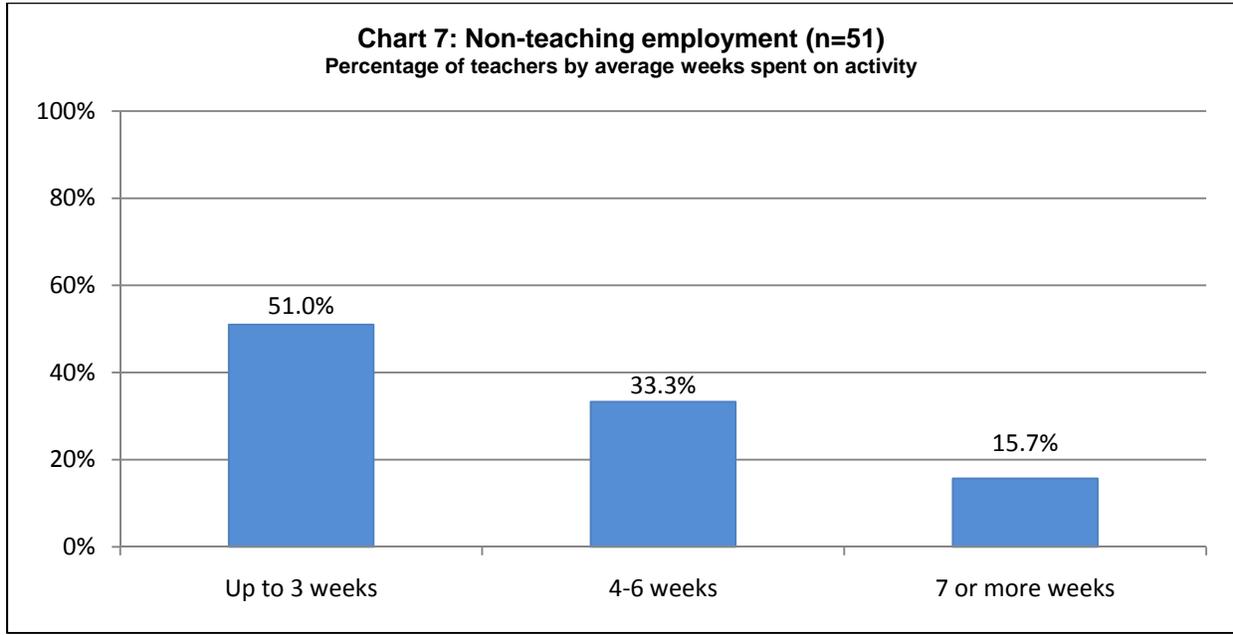
Other education-related employment

Of the 37 respondents who indicated spending some of their summer break in other education-related employment (other than teaching summer school), two-thirds (67.6%) worked up to three weeks in this activity. Another one-quarter (27%) spent from four to six weeks working in other education-related employment (Chart 6).



Employment not related to teaching

More teachers worked in non-teaching related employment (51) during the summer break than in teaching summer school (35) or in other education-related employment (37). Of these 51 teachers, about half (51%) worked up to three weeks in non-teaching employment. One-third worked four to six weeks in non-teaching employment (Chart 7).



What teachers say...

Based on the comments, most teachers who worked in paid employment during the summer break did so to supplement their own or family income:

“I work full-time during the summer since my student loan payments are huge. I do not earn enough money during the school year to live off in July and August.”

“Most summers I spend several weeks [working in my trade] earning extra money to ensure my family enjoys a good quality of life where a mother doesn’t work.”

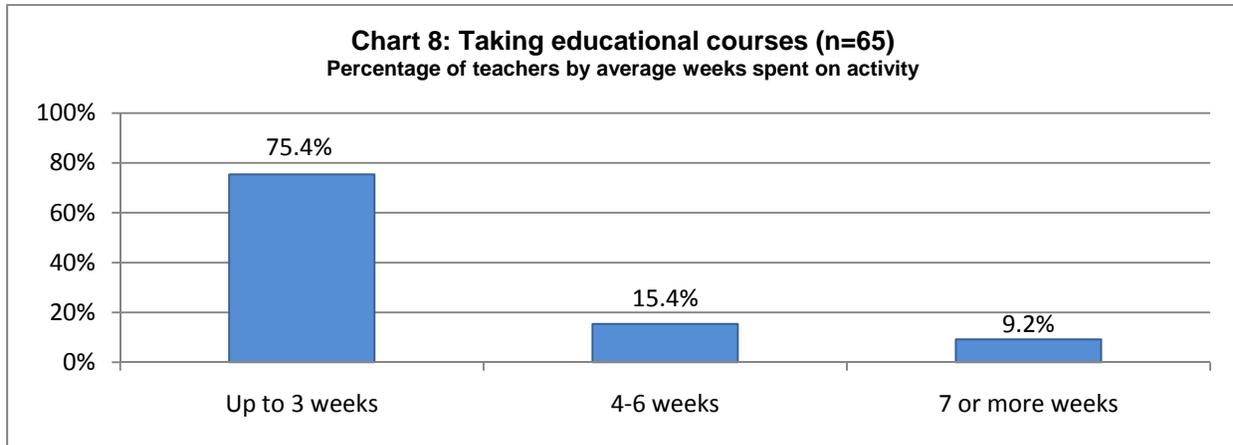
“My summer work in construction pays significantly better than the teaching salary, albeit without benefits. I need to work to make ends meet.”

“This is my fourth school year working as a teacher on call and I do not make enough money to rely solely on that income, therefore I have to keep a second job throughout the year.”

Time spent working on professional upgrading during the summer break

Taking educational courses

Of the 65 teachers who indicated spending time during the summer break taking educational courses, three-quarters (75.4%) spent up to three weeks doing so (Chart 8).

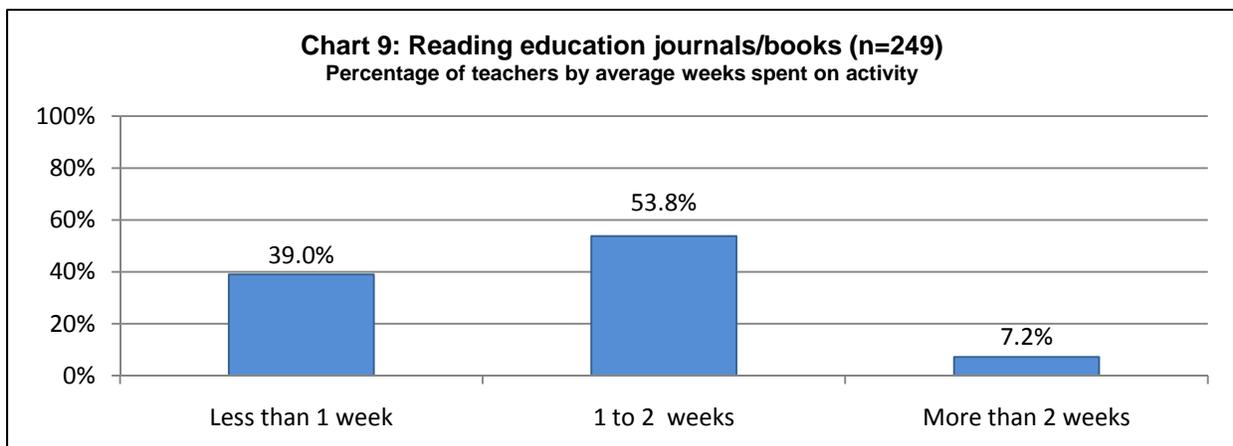


Several teachers commented that they took university courses over the summer, some specific to their teaching specialty and others to upgrade their salary category. One teacher expressed concern about how year-round schooling might affect a teacher’s ability to do professional upgrading at university:

“While education is a great way to spend the summer, it does leave little time for relaxation. Whenever I hear about proposals to shorten the summer break, I wonder how those taking courses would possibly have sufficient time.”

Reading education journals/books

Many teachers (249) said they spent time reading education journals and books over the summer break, with about half (53.8%) spending one to two weeks on this activity (Chart 9).

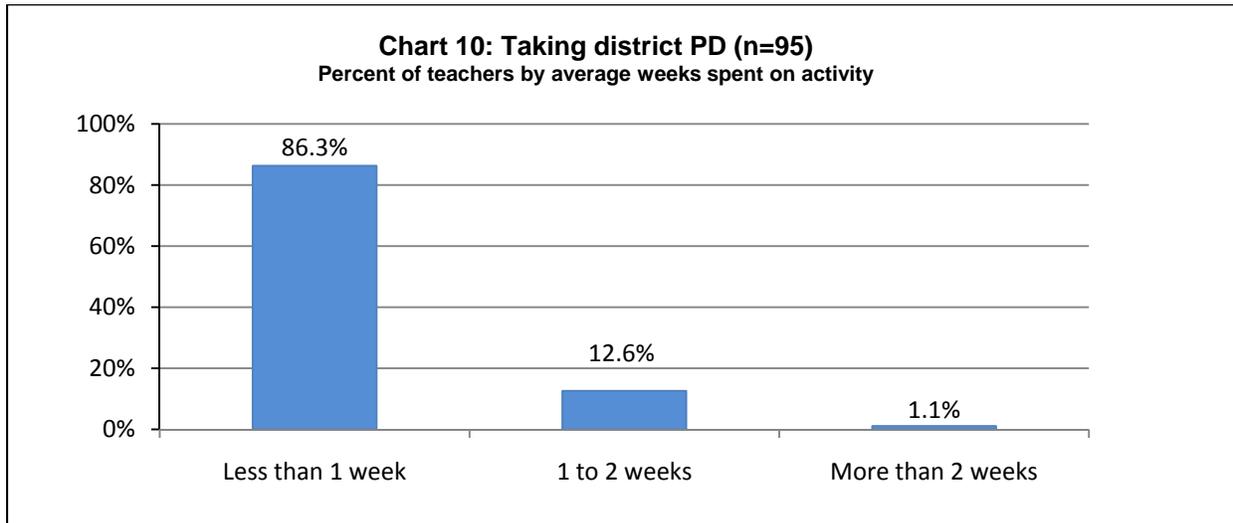


The following comment illustrates the enjoyment teachers experienced in doing daily reading and browsing for curriculum materials over the summer break:

“Daily reading prep. Journals, curriculum (internet) education sites, lots of ed/classroom related (for integration and extension of curriculum) reading. Great to have the time. Love it. Daily.”

Taking district-based PD

In some cases, locals and school districts have agreed to allocate some days during the summer break when teachers may choose to undertake PD activities. Of the 95 teachers who indicated taking district PD over the summer break, most (86.3%) spent less than one week on this activity (Chart 10).



What teachers say...

A few teachers expressed concerns about taking district-based PD during the summer break:

“I’m really not interested in using my summer to take PD, as many hours each day outside of school are taken up with school. I just want a break!”

“Summer breaks are precious to me and I try very hard to not do school-related tasks as I need the break. I do not agree with summer PD.”

“Was asked to attend PD during summer of 2008 and 2009, but refused. Attended PD in summer of 2007, which was strictly voluntary.”

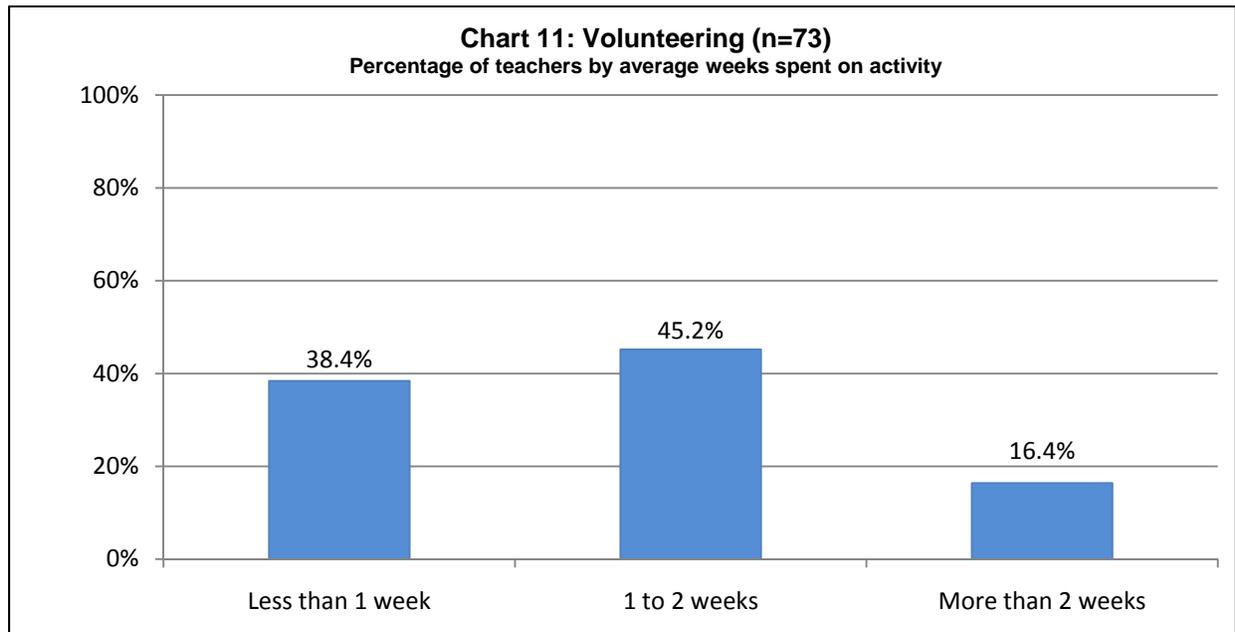
“Recently it came to my attention that some schools are doing PD in the summer and using PD days in the year as days in lieu. I am concerned that this type of action will lead to a loss of PD days during the year and an expectation that we do PD in the summer.”

One teacher expressed her enthusiasm for taking district PD during the summer break:

“I like summer PD. I realize that the union has worked hard for all of the PD we get in [our district]. At the same time I feel it is educationally sound to have two PD days related to the same topic back to back. I find that I am more likely as an individual teacher and as part of a staff to implement what we learn to the classroom.”

Time spent volunteering during the summer break

About one in eight teachers volunteered during the summer break. Of these 73 teachers, 38.4% volunteered for up to one week and 45.2% for one to two weeks (Chart 11).



What teachers say...

Some teachers volunteered in work involving youth, including coaching or travel:

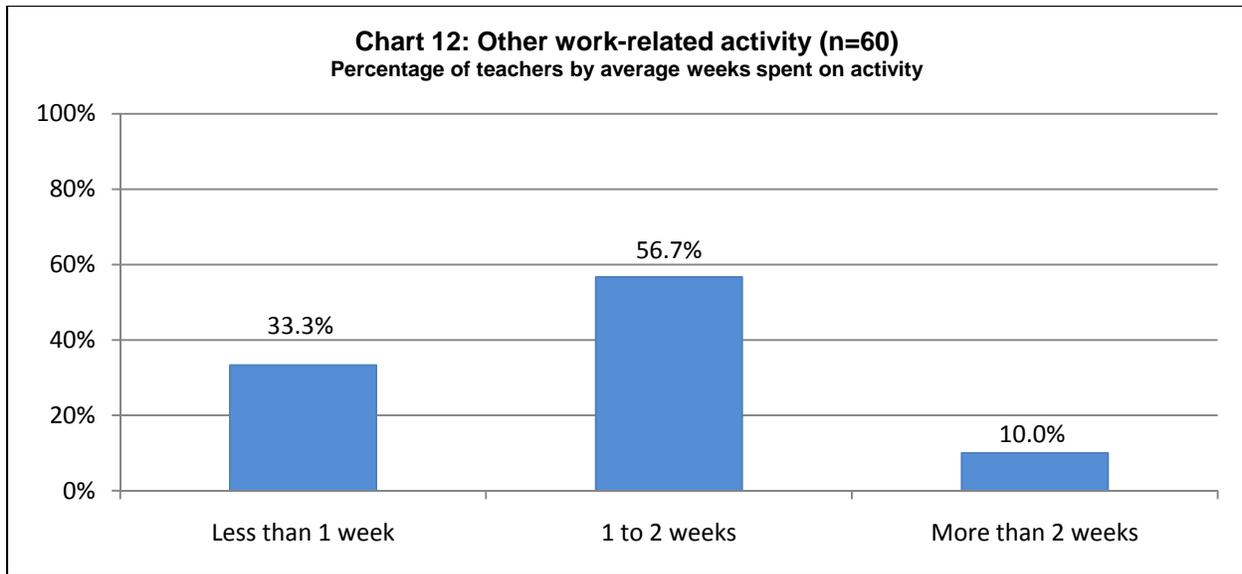
“This summer I will be volunteering my time [overseas], teaching English for three hours per day for four weeks.”

“Voluntarily took four kids on a seven-day [international] trip (taken for granted by everyone except the parents).”

“I was an elected official in our local government, serving as a municipal councillor for my city (volunteering and other work-related activities).”

Time spent on other work or work-related activities

Sixty teachers indicated they spent time during the summer break on other work or work-related activities not covered by the categories above. Almost all of these teachers (90%) spent up to two weeks in such activities. One-third spent less than one week doing so (Chart 12). Other work-related activities included attending BCTF conferences, union-related activities, coaching school teams, doing safety patrol, work related to art or music programs, and preparing for a student exchange.



What teachers say...

Teachers engaged in many other types of activities over the summer break that related to their role as a teacher:

“Worked on fitness level to help me in my teaching of new P.E. course (over and above one week of prep).”

“Last summer break I spent taking courses in assertiveness training, stress management, psychodynamic, leisure activities, goal-setting in order to be better able to handle the stress of my job.”

A teacher working as a local president commented on how contract issues also need attending to during the summer break:

“Job of a local president is all year round. Contract issues continue throughout the summer. Often local president is under pressure to resolve contract disputes before the start of the school year.”

Changes to the school calendar that would affect the summer break

What teachers say...

Two teachers expressed concern about districts changing the school calendar to year-round schooling:

“Clean up and move my stuff to the next school is the first thing that gets done. Then three weeks to recover before I can enjoy the break. If we ever go to year-round school, I will never recover, and end up very sick.”

“Problem: my school is trying for balanced school year which means I would have no break in the summer as my summer would only be four weeks.”

Some teachers expressed a preference for a shorter summer break with longer or more frequent breaks during the school year:

“I wish we have a shorter summer break and instead had longer and/or more frequent breaks. Students and staff are exhausted in June and nine-week break is too long for many students to retain their skills, so much time is spent in review and remediation. I'd prefer six weeks break in summer and three other weeks added mid-year.”

“I would like to have school start the last week in August so we could have two weeks at spring break which would be a great de-stressor at this time of year!”

“I believe strongly that changing the school calendar to work three months, off one month, for a twelve-month period would highly benefit my profession and the children I teach.”

Changes since the summer of 2000¹, where comparable

The average number of weeks teachers spent taking a break increased to 5.7 weeks in 2008 from 5.2 weeks in 2000. Table 4 also shows that a higher proportion of teachers in 2000 took a break for zero to three weeks and seven or more weeks compared to the those in 2008 (2009 survey). It appears there has been a shift toward teachers taking a four- to six-week break since 2000, with 21% doing so in 2000, increasing to 42.7% in 2008. This may be a reflection of the older demographic in the 2009 survey sample compared to the overall teaching population.

Table 4: Time spent taking a break

Number of weeks	2008 (Percent)	2000 (Percent)
0 to 3 weeks	18.7%	34%
4 to 6 weeks	42.7%	21%
7 or more weeks	38.6%	45%
Total	100.0%	100%

The 2001 and 2009 surveys contained some comparable findings about the type of activities teachers spent time on during the 2000 and 2008 summer breaks, respectively. About the same proportion of teachers spent time preparing for the upcoming school year, volunteering, and teaching summer school in 2008 as in 2000. A higher proportion of teachers took educational courses in 2000 (16.3%) compared to 2008 (11.5%).

About the same proportion of teachers worked in employment other than teaching summer school in 2000 (16.5%) as in 2008, when the percentages of teachers working in other education-related employment (6.6%) and non-teaching employment (9.1%) are combined (15.7%).

Table 5: Type of activity teachers engaged in during the 2000 and 2008 summer breaks

Activity – Summer break	Percent of respondents	
	2000	2008
Preparing for the upcoming school year	73.9%	77.8%
Volunteering	12.6%	13.0%
Taking educational courses	16.3%	11.5%
Teaching summer school	7.0%	6.2%
Employment not related to teaching	16.5%	9.1%
Other education-related employment		6.6%

¹ For 2000 figures, see Naylor, C., Schaefer, A., & Malcolmson, J. (2003). *Worklife of BC Teachers: A compilation of BCTF research reports on working and learning conditions in 2001*. Vancouver: BC Teachers' Federation, pp. 107–113.

Summary

Quantitative results

Time off during the summer break

On average, teachers took a break (e.g., vacation, time off) for 5.7 weeks during the summer of 2008. The findings suggest that over the course of a teaching career, teachers seem to take more time off during the summer. A much higher percentage of the youngest (35%) and least-experienced teachers (63%) took a break for zero to three weeks compared to the oldest (13%) and the most-experienced (13%) teachers. Half of teachers with 25 or more years' teaching experience took a break for seven or more weeks, while only 6% of teachers with less than 5 years' experience did so.

Time spent on teaching activities during the summer break

Respondents were engaged in many types of teaching activities over the summer break. The majority of these teachers spent time on school-related work at the start and the end of the school year. These teachers spent an average of 0.7 weeks completing year-end tasks and 1.2 weeks preparing for the upcoming school year.

Teachers were also engaged in various types of professional upgrading. Almost half (44%) spent time reading education journals and books for an average of 1.3 weeks. About 1 in 10 teachers surveyed took educational courses. On average, they spent 2.5 weeks taking courses, with about one-quarter of these teachers spending 4 or more weeks on this activity. Some teachers (17%) attended district-based PD activities during summer break, for an average of 0.6 weeks.

While only a small proportion of teachers worked in some type of paid employment during the summer, this activity took up a considerable amount of their summer break. Those teachers who taught summer school (6.2%) spent an average of 4.2 weeks doing so; for teachers with other education-related employment (6.6%) the average time spent was 2.9 weeks, and those who engaged in non-teaching employment (9%) spent an average of 3.8 weeks doing so.

Changes since the summer of 2000²

Teachers spent slightly more time, on average, taking a break during the summer in 2008 (5.7 weeks) compared to 2000 (5.2 weeks). About the same proportion of teachers spent time preparing for the upcoming school year, volunteering, and teaching summer school in 2008 as in 2000. A higher proportion of teachers took educational courses in 2000 (16.3%) compared to 2008 (11.5%). This may be a reflection of the older demographic in the 2009 survey sample compared to the overall teaching population.

Qualitative results

Recuperating and restoring work/life balance

Teachers had much to say about how they spent their summer break. The descriptive analysis of the comments reveals that many teachers spent the first few weeks of the break recuperating from the hectic demands of the school year, attending to personal responsibilities that had been put on hold during the school year, and caring for dependent or ill family members. While many

² Naylor, C., Schaefer, A., & Malcolmson, J. (2003). *Worklife of BC Teachers: A compilation of BCTF research reports on working and learning conditions in 2001*. Vancouver: BC Teachers' Federation, pp. 107–114.

teachers recuperated within one to two weeks, other teachers seemed to be greatly affected by job stress and reported taking longer to recover.

Views on summer professional development

Most teachers who engaged in district-based PD in the summer spent less than one week doing so. A few teachers expressed concern that summer PD may take away from time needed to recuperate from the school year, or may increasingly be shifted from the regular school year to the summer break. One teacher expressed the positive aspects of taking district-based PD during the summer.

Classroom preparation in the face of uncertainty

Some teachers spent a considerable amount of time preparing instructional materials for the upcoming school year. Some teachers expressed frustration either because they don't know what their assignment will be, or because they think they do know their assignment and do the associated preparation, only to have their assignment changed, leaving them with time wasted. Both cases illustrate teachers' motivation to do work over the summer that will contribute to their effectiveness during the upcoming school year.

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