



Executive Summary

Charlie Naylor, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher, BCTF Research

Margaret White, MIR
Senior Research Analyst, BCTF Research

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

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Introduction

The Research Department of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation conducted a survey of public school teachers to assess working and learning conditions in BC schools. The *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009 survey* collected information from teachers about demographic and employment characteristics, education and professional development, workload issues, summer break, job satisfaction and stress, if and why they were considering leaving the teaching profession, and teachers' priority areas for BCTF bargaining and advocacy to improve working and learning conditions.

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2009 with a random sample of 2,502 active members of the BC Teachers' Federation. The survey yielded 563 valid responses¹ (23% response rate) with completed surveys from 54 of the 60 school districts in BC.

Demographic and teaching characteristics

The survey respondents are similar to BC public school teachers in terms of gender and full-time/part-time teaching contract. Older, more-experienced teachers are over-represented, while less-experienced, younger teachers are under-represented. This should be considered when interpreting the results.

Survey respondents are well-distributed across K to 12 grade levels. However, Adult Education teachers make up a very small proportion of respondents. About one in five respondents (111) is a learning specialist teacher, working in a total of 145 FTE assignments. About one-third of learning specialist teachers also teach in enrolling positions, with an average enrolling assignment of 0.39 FTE.

In terms of the socio-economic environment of the school, 22.6% of respondents teach in low-income areas, 39.4% in mixed-income areas, and 29.6% in middle-income areas. Only 8.5% of respondents teach in a school in a high-income neighbourhood.

One in five teachers responding to the survey works part-time. Almost all of them are female and are over-represented in the 35-to-44-year-old age group. About half teach part-time for personal reasons, while one in five reduced their FTE assignment as a strategy to cope with workload.

Leaves and illness

Absenteeism due to illness is quite low among teachers responding to the survey, with most teachers being absent from 0 to 5 days in the school year. About one in eight teachers (12.4%) surveyed was on an unpaid or paid leave at the time of the survey. Teachers on leave are more likely to be female and between 35 to 44 years of age compared to the overall sample. About half of teachers on leave indicate that workload issues contributed to their decision to take a leave.

¹Random sample calculations show that 563 responses based on a population of 38,764 active BCTF members is sufficient to achieve results that fall within a five-percent margin of error and 95% confidence intervals for a random sample. See <http://www.custominsight.com/articles/random-sample-calculator.asp>

Teachers' education and professional development

Most respondents hold a bachelor's degree, with teacher training program (48%) or a university certificate or diploma above bachelor level (26%), while 25% have completed a master's degree. Most (87%) are not enrolled in formal education programs, which likely reflects the high proportion of teachers with qualifications beyond bachelor level. The survey findings indicate that teachers who wish to upgrade to a graduate degree in education may have difficulty doing so. About half of those not planning to enrol in an education program state family obligations (27.3%) or financial restraints (26.8%) as impediments, with some gender differences apparent.

Teachers have much to say about professional development (PD). The qualitative analysis reveals both positive and negative influences at school and district administrative levels, and a difference in values between those who see PD as consumers looking through and choosing from a list of options, and those teachers who are exercising autonomy in ways that create professional development, often in collaboration with peers. Respondents would like to see greater funding for PD and more self-directed, collaborative opportunities. There also appears to be significant support for mentoring of new teachers. Almost two-thirds of respondents said they would like to participate in mentoring either as a mentor or mentee.

Workload issues for BC teachers

The survey results suggest that full-time teachers are working hours well over the standard workweek, with a considerable amount of the work taking place during evenings and weekends. Full-time teachers in this survey work an average of 47.8 hours per week, with one in ten teachers working 60 or more hours per week². Part-time teachers work, on average, a total of 31.4 hours per week. About one-third reported how many unpaid hours they work per week in addition to their full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching assignment. On average, these part-time teachers work 7.3 hours additional hours per week. Most teachers work on school-related tasks before and after school and evenings (95.4%), during recess and lunch breaks (87.6%), and on weekends (76.9%).

Teachers spend several hours outside of the regular workday on school-related tasks, most commonly on classroom preparation (88%), attending meetings (84%), marking (76%), work-related e-mail (74%), and working with students outside of class (70%). Doing preparation (6.6 hours) and marking (4.5 hours) take up the most amount of time (on average, per week) outside of the regular work day. Administrative tasks also take up considerable time for many teachers, ranging from an average of 1.5 to 1.8 hours per week, depending on the task.

Teachers, especially in the secondary program, spend considerable time outside of the regular school day on extra-curricular activities. Almost one-half of teachers (44%) are involved in a professional learning community or some other form of collaboration. In terms of union involvement, 14% of respondents are in union roles and 4% of respondents are involved in Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs). A few teachers commented that they have reduced the time they spend on extra-curricular activities or doing union work, as their increased workload makes it difficult to take on these responsibilities.

² The average hours per week may be an under-estimate, as a stringent definition was used in the calculation, which included teachers who identified as full-time who indicated working only 30 hours per week. Caution should be used in comparing this result to other surveys.

How teachers spent their time on the summer break

On average, teachers took a break (e.g., vacation, time off) for 5.7 weeks during the 2008–09 summer break. The findings suggest that over the course of a teaching career, teachers are increasingly able to take time off during the summer. The youngest (35%) and least-experienced teachers (63%) took a break for 0 to 3 weeks compared to 13% of the oldest teachers and the most-experienced teachers. Half of teachers with 25 or more years teaching experience took a break for 7 or more weeks, while only 6% of teachers with less than five years' experience did so.

The descriptive qualitative analysis 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 put on hold during the school year, and caring for dependent or ill family members. While many teachers recuperated within one to two weeks, a few teachers seemed to be greatly affected by job stress and reported taking longer to recover.

Respondents were engaged in many types of teaching-related activities over the summer break. Most teachers spent time completing year-end tasks (0.7 weeks on average) and preparing for the upcoming school year (1.2 weeks, on average). Some teachers expressed frustration about how the instability of grade or course assignments made it very difficult to plan and prepare for the upcoming school year.

Teachers were also engaged in various types of professional upgrading and reading. Almost half (44%) spent time reading educational journals and books for an average of 1.3 weeks. About one in ten 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 PD activities during the 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.

BC teachers talk about satisfaction and stress in their work

One qualitative part of this study explores what makes teachers satisfied in their work and what is most stressful about their work. The analysis of written responses shows that many teachers clearly love teaching and gain immense satisfaction from a vocation which they see as instrumental in supporting children's learning and development. The study findings provide further evidence that teacher-student relationships and interactions are the primary causes of satisfaction, yet other positive interactions, with peers and parents, and some level of autonomy, are also important factors which contribute to teacher satisfaction. On the converse side, it almost always appears that it is the combining of factors which stresses teachers, such as multiple demands/limited time, classroom complexity in terms of class size and composition, lack of supports in general, and limited levels of support for dealing with student behaviour. Stress appears to be most severe when several sources of stress occur at the same time.

Most significant sources of stress

Of the 47 sources of stress listed in the survey, teachers rate level of support for students with disruptive behaviour, class composition issues, level of support for non-designated, grey area students, and the unmet needs of students as the four most significant sources of stress. At least 60% of respondents rate these factors as *high stress* or *very-high stress*. The attitude of the provincial government is rated as the fifth highest source of stress for teachers, slightly higher than inclusion issues. Class size, and testing and assessment, also rank in the top-ten most-significant stressors.

Job insecurity is increasingly an issue for newer teachers due to the steady erosion of teaching positions in BC over the past decade. The survey findings suggest that teachers teaching on call (TTOC) experience very high stress levels associated with job insecurity/concerns about employment, as do teachers with less than five years experience, or who are less than 35 years of age.

Teachers' perceptions of the effects of stress

The survey findings suggest that many teachers are experiencing stress from excessive workload, and few have energy left at the end of the workday. About half of teachers indicate that they find keeping up with the demands of their workload as a teacher stressful or that they have difficulty “turning off” thoughts or concerns about work during personal time, most or all of the time. Only one in five teachers indicate that they usually have energy left at the end of the day, after completing teaching responsibilities.

Teachers' responses are more divided in terms of how much work interferes with their work/life balance. One-third of respondents report that work interferes with family or personal life and one-third report having good work/life balance, most or all of the time.

Learning specialist teachers and inclusion issues

The survey collected data on both the work and perceptions of those specialists³ teaching in Special Education and/or Learning Assistance, concerning their roles. Data on inclusionary issues were also collected from all respondents. Time allocations for Special Education teachers averaged 0.54 FTE, and for Learning Assistance teachers 0.42 FTE, data which confirm role fragmentation and reduced specialist time-allocations for supporting inclusion. The fragmentation of the role of Special Education and Learning Assistance teachers was initially identified in a 2004 BCTF report.⁴

Three-quarters of Special Education teachers report that workload is higher now than it was five years ago. For all respondents, issues around inclusion are significant stressors, with a high level of concern about lack of supports to address behaviour and to meet the needs of grey area students. For both learning specialist teachers and classroom teachers, concerns are primarily linked to what they see as conditions which limit their capacity to meet the needs of all students.

³ In the past, learning specialist teachers were known as non-enrolling teachers.

⁴ The challenge of specialist support teachers—Learning Assistance, ESL, and Special Education—in multiple roles: A PSA/BCTF Research discussion paper: <http://www.bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5770>.

Changes in workload, stress, and job satisfaction

The survey findings provide evidence that working and learning conditions have deteriorated over the last five years. At least two-thirds of the teachers surveyed say their stress level and workload increased compared to five years ago and four out of ten report decreased job satisfaction. A comparison of demographic characteristics reveals few differences in which teacher groups experienced increased stress or increased workload compared to five years ago. This suggests that increases in workload and stress levels over the last five years are pervasive, affecting teachers across BC, independent of age, gender, experience, employment contract, or grades taught.

Reasons teachers are considering leaving the profession

One in five teachers say they are considering leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement, with teachers who are mid-career being the most likely to consider doing so. Descriptive analysis of written responses reveals several reasons these teachers are considering leaving the teaching profession, including increased workload, stress and burnout, health conditions aggravated by stress, lack of encouragement, job insecurity, and dissatisfaction with provincial and district governance. Some teachers also comment that deteriorating learning and working conditions make it harder to feel effective as a teacher. Six in ten teachers say they would recommend teaching as a profession to others and one-third say they would not.

Teachers' priority areas for BCTF bargaining and advocacy

The survey asked teachers to rate the level of importance of 13 areas for the BCTF to focus on in collective bargaining and advocacy to improve working and learning conditions. The five most important areas of focus (in order of importance) are improved support for Special Education, more time for planning and preparation, reduced class size, and improvements in salary and benefits. At least 60% of teachers in the survey ranked these areas of focus as *quite important* or *very important*.

Priorities differ among teacher groups. Female teachers rate (on average) all areas of focus except for improving salary and benefits as more important than male teachers do. Secondary teachers assign a higher priority to providing more time for planning and prep, addressing issues with BCeSIS, programs to support wellness and work/life balance, and improving salaries and benefits. Elementary teachers rate the importance of improving support for Special Education and ESL students considerably higher than do secondary teachers. Teachers with less than 10 years' experience assign higher importance to improving resources (e.g., books, computers) and opportunities for collaboration and sharing with peers. Newer teachers rate technology concerns as less important than do their more-experienced peers.

Implications and discussion

The qualitative findings show that many teachers clearly love teaching and gain immense satisfaction from a vocation which they see as instrumental in developing children's learning and development.

However, for many teachers it is the combination of factors that produces the most stress and which may have severe consequences. The most significant sources of stress for teachers relate to classroom conditions: level of support for students with disruptive behaviour, class composition issues, level of support for non-designated, grey area students, and the unmet needs of students were the four most significant sources of stress. These findings imply that strategies to reduce teacher stress need to be part of a more comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the combination of factors that most contributes to teacher stress.

This study provides evidence that most teachers are working many hours outside of the regular work day on a range of school-related activities, with administrative and reporting requirements taking up an increasing amount of their time. The survey findings indicate that, in the view of respondents, working and learning conditions are worsening, with at least two-thirds of teachers (who have been teaching for five years or more) experiencing increased stress levels and workload compared to five years ago, and 40% reporting decreased job satisfaction. These changes appear to be pervasive, affecting teachers across demographic groups, implying that strategies to reduce workload and stress would be of benefit to teachers across the board.

Increased workload and stress for teachers may be a consequence of the significant reduction in teaching positions arising from a growing funding crisis in BC's public education system. Data from this study suggest that this reduction has increased workload for classroom teachers and reduced support provided by specialist teachers. With severe cuts expected in the 2010–11 school year, the implications are problematic for an education system in which teacher workload is already a significant issue. The survey results indicate that excessive workloads contribute to teachers being on medical leave, especially for a stress-related illness/disability. If workload increases and specialist support decreases due to cuts in teaching positions in the 2010–11 year and beyond, there may be increased stress-related claims in the coming years.

Increased teacher workload and stress, and loss of job satisfaction, have considerable implications for students in the classroom and for teachers' quality of work life, and will likely affect teacher retention in future years. There is evidence from other empirical studies that excessive teacher workloads, and problematic conditions in classrooms, cause teacher burnout and negatively impact students' learning.⁵ This survey found that one in five teachers is considering leaving the profession, with some of these teachers identifying increased workload, stress, and burn-out as reasons influencing their perspective.

The study results indicate that teachers view their working conditions as fundamentally linked to the conditions that support student learning, and that they want to see improvements to working conditions that give students better chances of success. One key set of evidence for this claim is that while pay and benefits are stressed by many teachers as directions they want the union to pursue, respondents place addressing working conditions linked to student learning as a slightly-higher priority than improving their own pay and benefits.

⁵ Leithwood, K. (2006). *Teacher working conditions that matter: Evidence for change*. Toronto: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

Perhaps it is time to recognize and build on positive aspects of teaching, for the benefit of teachers and students. For individuals, schools, unions, and employers (districts), an awareness of the negative impact of these combinations may also be of utility in addressing individual issues or combinations of factors which cause stress. This suggests that a more exploratory approach might be useful in some areas, involving greater discussion with or among teachers to consider options and possible directions. Another exploratory area might involve generating more debate among teachers and within the union about priorities for professional development. Pursuing the option of a mentorship program may also improve the quality of work life for BC teachers. Opening up more conversations on the positive and the problematic in teachers' work may engage teachers, employers, and unions in better and more collaborative ways to take positive control, and to better manage professional relationships and work.

Future research directions

The study identifies some issues that require further exploration. As new teachers are under-represented in this survey, further research is needed to explore how the instability of the public education system is affecting younger, less-experienced teachers, and to what extent bargaining and other priorities differ between the least- and most-experienced teachers.

Gender differences are apparent, possibly due to work/life balance issues. Almost all of the part-time teachers in the survey are female, with over half working part-time for personal reasons. One in five part-time teachers does so as a way to cope with workload, effectively using their own unpaid time for marking and preparation. Female teachers are more likely to say family obligations pose a barrier to pursuing graduate studies. Female teachers place more importance on improving classroom conditions than on improving salary and benefits. With the increased feminization of teaching, gender issues may have been under-studied and may require more in-depth attention.

Finally, the finding that one in five teachers is considering leaving the teaching profession for reasons other than retirement is of great concern. The survey asked teachers to explain their reasons for wanting to leave teaching, and the qualitative data generated some useful insights as to the factors influencing teachers to consider leaving the profession. Further research is needed to fully validate these qualitative findings and to further explore the implications for teacher retention.

The BCTF Research team appreciates the contribution of BC teachers, whose input enabled us to generate this study of the working lives of teachers in our public schools.

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