



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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The lived experience of Teachers Teaching on Call in British Columbia's public schools: *The 2014 TTOC Working Conditions survey*

Summary and discussion of study implications

To access the full report, see bctf.ca/TeachersOnCall.aspx?id=5022

BCTF Research,
in collaboration with the Teachers Teaching on Call Advisory Committee

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A Union of Professionals



1. Only a minority of survey respondents choose to be a teacher teaching on call as a lifestyle option, although most report satisfying elements of their work as a TTOC

Many teachers teaching on call (TTOC) gain satisfaction from their work—finding meaning and loving teaching—when offered the often very-limited opportunities to teach in BC’s public schools. However, this satisfaction, shared by many respondents, should not infer that a majority of TTOC are content with their professional lives as TTOC, because of factors that will be discussed later in this section. In fact, only one in ten respondents selected to be a TTOC for lifestyle reasons, and a small minority (7.4%) are retired and intend to work as a TTOC for the foreseeable future. These TTOC who are retired from full-time teaching likely also impact the numbers choosing TTOC work as a lifestyle option. Retired teachers already have a source of income through their pension, so working as a TTOC provides a supplement to existing income rather than their primary source of earnings.

The common denominator among many TTOC was that the same joy in the act of teaching that marked teacher responses to the 2009 *Worklife of BC teachers* survey¹ was apparent in TTOC in 2013. At its heart, and whatever the pedagogical or organizational complexity, there is an essential simplicity to the concept of teaching—getting students engaged, seeing learning occur, using one’s own mind, skills, and heart to create learning experiences of significance and interest to students. Some survey comments implied that autonomy was also a key factor in their joy in teaching—‘being able to use my own plans’ implied teacher judgment and autonomy as a key factor in what ‘makes teachers tick’, whether they be full-time, part-time, or a teacher teaching on call.

2. Most teachers teaching on call work as a TTOC out of necessity, and have provided considerable evidence that the life of a TTOC is a precarious existence

Almost two-thirds of respondents work as a TTOC but would prefer full-time employment. Discounting those respondents who have retired from full-time teaching but are doing some TTOC work (and including the 13% who would welcome a part-time contract), over three quarters of TTOC want full-time or part-time work but cannot access it. Thus, being a TTOC is not a lifestyle option, it is making the best of the limited opportunities to pursue a career in teaching.

With almost 21% of respondents reporting fewer than 20 days of teaching employment in the 2013–14 school year, and over 60% reporting fewer than 60 days of work, it is clear that TTOC work opportunities are very limited. 20 days of work in one school year is slightly more than 10% of the time that a full-time teacher works, and 60 days TTOC work is less than one-third of a full-time teaching position in BC’s public schools. The availability of work can be impacted by a number of factors, including districts’ budget constraints and/or where layoffs are occurring.

In terms of the TTOC being available, there were other issues which on occasion limited respondents’ capacity to work. They might get sick on days when called in to teach, or have appointments which are difficult to rearrange, or have a sick child or family member. 44% of respondents work at employment other than teaching for some days of the week, which prevents them accepting TTOC work on those days. Having other work may seem a lifestyle choice, but is

¹ <http://www.bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=21498>

more likely a necessity—providing some guaranteed income while hoping to fit TTOC work around the other employment. Life gets in the way for TTOC as it does for everyone, but in instances like being sick when called in to work, the consequences are more severe for TTOC. Over half of TTOC respondents also stated that they felt pressure to accept assignments when feeling unwell, since they have no income if they do not work, and no sick days to use or to bank. So if a TTOC is healthy in October and gets no call from a district, then gets the call in November but is sick and cannot work, there are two consequences: one is that the TTOC loses income, and the second is that their chances of being called again may be reduced, depending on the district’s call-out system and approach.

Another indicator of the precarious existence of teachers teaching on call is the limited income levels they report. There can be little doubt that some TTOC live in poverty. One quarter of TTOC reported income generated from their TTOC employment of less than \$10,000 in the 2013 tax year, and altogether 64% of respondents reported TTOC income of less than \$30,000. It is somewhat uncertain how representative this income data is, as there was a high non-response rate to the question.

Income from work other than TTOC employment, and income from other family members with higher incomes, mitigated poverty to some extent for survey respondents. Nevertheless, 37.5% reported their total household income before taxes at below \$50,000. Considering the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative’s estimate² of a living wage in Vancouver being \$37,638 annually for each of two parents working full-time, many TTOCs are clearly existing at well below that level.

In addition to low income levels, many TTOC have student loan debt that adds to their financial insecurities. One-third of respondents had student loan debt, and almost half of those with such debts said the amounts owing were over \$20,000. While one might expect the debts to be owed by the youngest respondents, there were also surprising data that showed that almost one in seven TTOC who had student loan debt are in the age group 55–64. These data suggest some longer-term financial and possibly poverty issues, rather than a short phase of debt-load and limited employment. For some TTOC, the pattern of limited work and financial pressures, including multiple sources of debt other than student loans, appears to have become a longer-term pattern or reality in their lives.

The professional lives of many TTOC are precarious because they are uncertain and unpredictable. Not knowing if they will be called out to work, and not knowing how much income they may earn, are two pivotal factors which impact TTOC in very direct ways that limit both their professional experiences and career evolution as teachers, and their income.

But there are other, and in some ways less-tangible, indications of TTOC existence being marginalized, with survey responses providing various examples of what they considered to be unfair treatment, or where they felt subject to isolation and exclusion. They often felt that school district processes for call-outs were unfair and inequitable, with all the power and control on the district side, and them as TTOC dependent on a process they did not control. Similarly, some felt that call-out policies did not provide equitable access to TTOC employment. While some respondents reported welcoming schools, and good levels of collaboration with teachers, others felt excluded in staff rooms and reported difficult relationships with some administrators. They

² <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2015/04/CCPA-BC-Living-Wage-2015.pdf>

also reported some students disrespecting TTOC, seeing them as some form of ‘second-class’ teacher who came in to teach them only when the ‘first class’ teacher was absent from school.

Although over half of respondents had attended a BCTF PD workshop, close to one-third had participated in local teacher associations’ TTOC Committee, and 30% had participated in a local union social function, others reported they felt underserved by the BCTF and that in their view the union focused almost exclusively on the needs of permanent teachers and did not represent the interests of TTOC. However, the survey was conducted during negotiations in 2014, in which the BCTF did gain improvements to pay, benefits, and experience credits for TTOC. Whether different responses might have been generated after the bargaining negotiations were complete cannot be ascertained, but it is possible that there may be limited communication between the BCTF and TTOC, in spite of efforts that include the work of the BCTF’s TTOC Advisory Committee. If many TTOC do indeed live somewhat isolated professional lives, it is possible that some will not access BCTF information or know of bargaining efforts and successes in improving the working conditions of TTOC.

It may be useful to consider these findings as grounds for further exploration and discussion. The common denominators are either isolation or exclusion, whether in some schools or in terms of TTOC’s involvement in and communication with/from the BCTF or a local teacher association. So how might TTOC be better included in the community and culture of a school? How might they feel more welcomed and supported by their union? These questions may be good starting points to better understand perspectives, experiences, and possible approaches to supporting TTOC and perhaps making their working lives somewhat less uncertain and precarious.

3. How the historical context adds to an understanding of why being a TTOC is a fact of life for many wanting to become teachers in BC’s public schools

Steady erosion of teaching positions since 2002–03

The last decade has marked an ongoing erosion of teaching employment in BC’s public schools, a direct consequence of government funding, policy, and contract-stripping actions. Full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching employment has declined steadily since 2002, after the BC Liberal government was elected. There were about 3,000 fewer FTE teachers in BC public schools in 2014–15 than in 2002–03.³ While much of this decrease occurred early in the decade, the erosion of teaching positions has continued in recent years. Ministry data⁴ shows there were 1,095.16 fewer FTE teachers in 2014–15 than in 2011–12 (the year before the Learning Improvement Fund was introduced).⁵ This is the context in which teachers teaching on call have been seeking employment, as each year there are more new graduates with education degrees and a diminishing supply of permanent part-time and full-time positions. This major loss of teaching positions has created an ever-growing surplus of TTOC. The increased supply of TTOC has reduced the chances of individual TTOC accessing days of teaching at the same level as before the cuts, and extended the time many TTOC spend in this precarious form of employment prior to obtaining a continuing teaching contract.

³ These FTE figures represent teaching positions funded by district operating grants. This calculation is based on FTE figures from annual *Teacher Statistics* reports, except for 2014–15, where Form 1530 staffing data was used, as the Ministry cautions the 2014–15 teacher statistics data is not comparable to previous years.

⁴ Ministry of Education. Form 1530 staffing data, unpublished.

⁵ See p.19 of the BCTF’s 2015 Education Funding brief to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, <http://www.bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx>.

Discouraged and underemployed, many TTOC are considering leaving the profession

The *2014 TTOC survey* provides considerable evidence that TTOC are underemployed—three-quarters of TTOC would prefer a part-time or full-time teaching contract, over one-half do not have as much TTOC work as they would like, and many of these TTOC have annual earnings below the poverty line. All of these factors contribute to why one in three TTOC in the survey indicated they are considering leaving teaching in the BC public school system for reasons other than retirement. The reasons why they are considering leaving the profession include working as a TTOC is not financially sustainable; lack of job security with little hope for the future; too long to wait for a continuing teaching position; discouraged by the political climate in BC public education; and considering changing to another occupation (for example, nursing or other health professional) that offers more stable employment.

A surplus of new teachers may soon turn into a teacher shortage

Yet it appears that there is about to be a shift in teaching opportunities in BC, in part because public schools appear to be moving into a period of increasing enrolment. In 2015–16, there were 6,559 more school-aged students in the September enrolment than anticipated⁶. And according to BC Stats population projections, the school-aged population (5–17 years) in BC is projected to increase steadily each year for the next 25 years, totalling 738,900 children by 2041. This represents a 21% increase (128,100 more children) in the school-aged population in BC compared to 2015.⁷ Perhaps this is one reason why WorkBC's 2022 Labour Market Outlook (2014)⁸ projects that job openings for elementary and secondary teachers in BC will reach 24,900 by 2022. In five BC regions, it is anticipated that at least three-quarters of job openings will be to replace teachers, mostly for reasons of retirement.

While this is welcome news for TTOC seeking permanent teaching jobs, it may pose challenges in terms of recruitment and retention, as many TTOC, discouraged and finding teaching to be financially unsustainable, may have left the profession before these openings occur. The survey findings suggest that one in three TTOC may do so, with their comments revealing the level of discouragement many TTOC are feeling about the length of time they have been working as a TTOC without obtaining a permanent teaching position. To prevent a teacher shortage in the near future, efforts are needed in the present to encourage TTOC to stay in the profession before they leave BC to seek teaching employment elsewhere or train for another occupation.

4. Considerations for the future

While the TTOC Advisory Committee may wish to offer some recommendations to the BCTF Executive Committee, some possible options may be useful to consider here.

First is that some efforts to improve the precarious and uncertain professional lives of TTOC might be a focus for action by the BCTF. Building on improvements which were made to the collective agreement in the last round of bargaining, there may also be ways to build advocacy to secure increased levels and duration of employment for TTOCs. Such advocacy might point to

⁶ BCTF calculations with data from Ministry of Education Operating Grants tables (Estimates and Recalculated).

⁷ BC Stats. (May 2015). British Columbia Population Projections: 2015 to 2041, Table 3: British Columbia Population by Selected Age Groups, Estimated (1971 to 2014) and Projected (2015 to 2041), p.3, and Table 6: British Columbia Population by 5-year Age Group, Estimated (1971 to 2014) and Projected (2015 to 2041), p.6. Access the PDF version of report at

www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/StatisticsBySubject/Demography/PopulationProjections.aspx

⁸ WorkBC. (2014). British Columbia 2022 Labour Market Outlook - WorkBC projections for supply and demand for occupations to 2022, p.9. www.workbc.ca/WorkBC/media/WorkBC/Documents/Docs/BC-LM-Outlook-2012-2022.pdf.

the changing teacher and student demographics which may impact future demand for contract teachers and TTOC, and argue for districts to take a pro-active stance and enhance TTOC employment in order to keep teachers available who are familiar with a district's schools and students.

BCTF Research has cited evidence of projected increases in the 0–19 aged population in BC, evidence of higher levels of Kindergarten to Grade 3 student enrolment in recent years, and possible increased demand for teachers because of high retirement projections outlined in the Labour Market Outlook report by the government of BC⁹. These data suggest that there may soon be an increased demand for teachers, which might enable some who currently work as TTOC to obtain full-time or part-time teaching employment. School districts that are unaware of such demographic trends might soon face a shortage of teachers with contracts, and also a shortage of TTOC, as some teachers currently working as a TTOC step into full-time or part-time contract positions. One way to address this could be the hiring of current TTOC into more-permanent contracts, either as TTOC but with higher levels of call-outs, or as permanent full-time TTOC to fill positions as required.

There were a number of specific issues that TTOC in the survey indicated they would like to see addressed, including benefits, sick leave, and salary. The *2014 TTOC survey* was conducted in May-June of 2014, while BCTF was in negotiations for a new teacher collective agreement with the British Columbia Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA). Until September 2014, TTOC were paid on scale only once they had worked in TTOC assignments for four days in a row. As of September 2014, the new six-year collective agreement includes improvements in TTOC pay, benefits, and experience credit. Teachers on call are no longer required to work four days in a row to be paid on scale. Article B.2.6, Teacher Teaching on Call Pay and Benefits, states, "An Employee who is employed as a teacher teaching on call shall be paid 1/189 of his/her category classification and experience, to a maximum of the rate at Category 5, Step 7, for each full day worked". As of July 1, 2016, the maximum pay rate will increase to Category 5, Step 8. This is a significant improvement for many TTOC, when viewed in light of the survey findings. The majority of TTOC in this survey indicated that none (30%) or less than one-quarter (37.9%) of their TTOC assignments in 2013–14 were for four days in a row. One in five TTOC said they were not able to accept assignments offered for four consecutive days, for reasons such as having a part-time teaching contract (70%), family responsibilities (28%), and non-teaching work commitments (8%). Article B.2.6 addresses this inequity, as TTOC are no longer penalized for factors beyond their control that prevent them from accepting assignments for four days in a row; all teaching days are now paid on scale.

There were indications from respondents that there might be better support for professional learning, with more communication about existing PD opportunities, increased opportunities for collaboration, and more PD targeted at the needs of TTOC. These findings suggest that BCTF support for the professional lives of teachers was seen as particularly important for TTOC—many of whom are at the start of their teaching careers.

It should be of concern that almost one-third (31.7%) of TTOC are considering leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement, with the limited work causing instability and financial problems to such an extent that they are considering other work and career options. This represents a significant waste of skilled teachers, who have chosen a teaching career yet had difficulty entering the profession and accessing full-time or part-time contracts. It would be a

⁹ <https://www.workbc.ca/getmedia/0fe6f15a-dcd9-4316-b0fa-488b3fab9920/BC-LM-Outlook-2012-2022.pdf.aspx>

considerable irony if many who currently work as a TTOC should make career-ending decisions in the near term, if the demand for teachers does in fact increase in the coming years.

In terms of communication between TTOC and the BCTF, there may be a need to find time for reflections and discussion within the BCTF. There were indications from a reasonable number of respondents that they did not feel well-served by their union, and in many cases they felt isolated in schools and in the profession. Steps to encourage better connections between contract teachers and TTOC might be one option to consider, both provincially and at the local level.

TTOC respondents suggest that some advocacy and bargaining can address some of these issues, while others may need discussion about what can be done to better serve the needs of TTOC within the BCTF, and ensure that they feel included and welcome within the union and in the profession.

Finally, while there is much uncertainty about what the future may hold, one possible future is a time when the demand-supply equation shifts from excess supply (caused largely by policy and funding decisions rather than enrolment) to excess demand, as student enrolment grows, and assuming that teachers continue to retire and all positions created by retirement are replaced. This will require a mindset change on the part of school districts and government, to consider actions which will ensure an adequate supply of teachers. Should such a change occur, the future for those who have struggled for some years to pursue their teaching careers as TTOC may look considerably brighter, as they could initially fill some of the demand for full-time teachers. In addition, with the improvements for TTOC made in the 2013–2019 collective agreement, there is some evidence that the working conditions of TTOC are improving.

Perhaps the page has turned in terms of employment prospects and working conditions for the teachers teaching on call in our public schools. But as this is BC, where all predictions are precarious when government policies can make the best predictions uncertain, we may have to wait and see.