



SPRING 2011

IN THIS BRIEF...

You will learn how states and local school districts are using working conditions surveys to both identify and address the issues that lead to personnel attrition in their schools.

The Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey Initiative...

The New Teacher Center (NTC) currently works with 11 states and districts to administer the anonymous, online Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey. The NTC tailors the survey to meet the needs of individual states and districts; manages the survey process; analyzes survey results; generates individual school-level, district-level and/or state-level reports; and works with clients to develop training materials enabling local-level personnel to understand survey results and use them for school improvement planning. For more information, go to:

<http://www.newteachercenter.org/tlcsurvey/>

About Us...

We are the National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities (Personnel Improvement Center), a federally funded technical assistance and dissemination project, created on October 1, 2008 through a cooperative agreement, H325C080001, between the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the U.S. Department of Education.

USING ONLINE WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEYS AS A MEANS OF RETAINING QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL

by Eve Müller, Ph.D.

In response to high rates of attrition, some states and localities are using online working conditions surveys to address the challenge of retaining qualified education personnel, including special education personnel. Based on examples drawn from working conditions surveys conducted by the New Teacher Center (NTC) in North Carolina and Massachusetts – as well as working conditions surveys conducted independently at the state level in California and at the local level in Nevada and North Carolina — this practice brief describes how surveys are designed and implemented, how results can be used to enhance teacher retention and how surveys address special education-related issues.

WHY CONDUCT WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEYS?

Evidence suggests that improved working conditions for teachers and other education personnel can result in higher levels of motivation, more effective instruction and better rates of retention. In 2002, Governor Mike Easley and the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission launched the first online survey of working conditions that enabled data to be analyzed at the building level. Since then, many states and localities have followed North Carolina's lead by conducting working conditions surveys of their own, often in partnership with the NTC (see text box). Because each of these surveys is based on a commitment to data-driven decision making, data is never an end in itself. A key component of the survey process involves bringing stakeholders

together and using data to guide school improvement discussions at state and/or local levels.

STATE AND DISTRICT EXAMPLES

The North Carolina (NC) Teacher Working Conditions Survey. The first of its kind, this online survey conducted in conjunction with the NTC, is now in its eighth year. The 2010 version, which had a more than 80% response rate, included more than 105,688 licensed teachers, related service providers and administrators. For more information, go to <http://ncteachingconditions.org/index>.

The Massachusetts Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (Mass TeLLS). The 2008 Mass TeLLS, also conducted in partnership with the NTC, had a 51% response rate and included more than 40,000 licensed teachers, related service providers and administrators. Principals, included in this number, complete a modified version of the survey. For more information and examples of both versions of the survey, go to <http://www.masstells.org/>.

Clark County Teaching and Learning Conditions (TLC) Online Survey. Clark County has been conducting its own working conditions survey since 2006, and received a 43% response to its 2010 version that included more than 8,000 licensed personnel including teachers, related service providers and administrators. For more information, go to <http://ccsdtlc.org/>.



USING ONLINE WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEYS AS A MEANS OF RETAINING QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL

Winston-Salem/Forsyth (WS/F) County Schools Working Conditions Surveys. Every other year, WS/F County School District participates in the NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey, but on alternate years, the county conducts its own surveys: one that parallels the state survey and addresses licensed building-level personnel and another that addresses classified staff, including paraprofessionals. The surveys usually receive more than 6,000 responses, representing an approximately 80% response rate.

California's Special Education Supports Module (SESM), California recently added the SESM to its biannual California School Climates Survey (CSCS) and California Healthy Kids Survey. Questions are based on a comprehensive retention study of California special educators conducted by Ken Futernick (2007) (see text box). All building-level personnel who serve students with individualized education plans (IEPS) are invited to participate, including licensed general and special educators, related service providers, administrators and other building staff such as paraprofessionals. In 2008-09, more than 10,500 education personnel responded to the SESM, and in 2009-10, respondents totaled more than 47,000.

SURVEY FEATURES

Although all working conditions surveys ask similar types of questions regarding school climate, they can be tailored to meet the needs of specific states or school districts. Examples of survey question "categories" include the following:

- The NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey, like the Mass TeLLS and other NTC-based surveys, includes approximately 40 questions about time, facilities and resources, managing student conduct, community engagement and support, teacher leadership, school leadership, professional development, instructional practices and supports, and new teacher supports.
- California's SESM includes 20 special education-specific questions relating to bureaucratic barriers to effective service delivery, collaboration between general and special education, expectations and supports for special populations and personnel supports.

Another common survey feature involves the importance of preserving participant anonymity. For example:

- Mass TeLLS ensures anonymity of participants by assigning random computer-generated access codes and not asking for demographic information such as years of experience or role. Survey responses are only released at the building and district level if at least 40% of eligible education personnel respond.
- Although SESM does ask participants whether they are general or special education-related staff, data are only disaggregated at the school level if there are at least five members in each group (e.g., special educators and related services providers).
- TLC online surveys are only seen by Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ) research staff, no identifying (e.g., demographic) information is ever shared at the building or district level and responses are only released at the building or district level if at least 35% of eligible education personnel respond.

Sharing data is a key part of each of the surveys highlighted in this brief, and many states and school districts post reports online. For example:

- The NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey posts school- and district-level survey results as well as research reports based on survey data (e.g., analyses of current trends and principal working conditions).
- Clark County posts building-level response rates, as well as password protected district- and building-level reports.
- SESM survey data are currently being analyzed by WestEd, with more information available at http://cscs.wested.org/survey_content/tesis.

- Some surveys offer incentives to respond. For example, schools with 100% response rates to the Mass TeLLS participate in weekly and grand prize drawings for grants to improve working conditions.

USING SURVEY DATA TO IMPROVE RETENTION

Perhaps the most critical component of working conditions surveys is the use of data by states and localities to inform school improvement efforts. All surveys discussed in this brief offer guidelines and/or assistance to local-level personnel on interpreting and using data to improve working conditions and retention of qualified education personnel. Examples of how survey data has been (or will be) used to improve retention include the following:

- Mass TeLLS offers three-hour workshops for district labor-management teams at no cost to the district. The



USING ONLINE WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEYS AS A MEANS OF RETAINING QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION PERSONNEL



training focuses on understanding the survey data, reviewing conversation protocols for discussing data at the school and district level, and developing strategies for discussing data with the public. Training materials can be found at (<http://www.masstells.org/sites/default/files/attachments/training.pdf>).

- The State of California has issued a “Workbook for Improving School Climate and Closing the Achievement Gap” to give building- and district-level personnel, including administrators, step-by-step guidance on interpreting and responding to survey results. One section of the three-part workbook addresses closing the achievement gap between general and special education students. In addition, the CA Comprehensive Center has launched a district-level demonstration site and will facilitate the district leadership team’s use of survey data to improve working conditions.
- Clark County’s TLC team assists schools with analyzing data and helps facilitate stakeholder discussions of how data can be used to enhance working conditions and student learning conditions, as well as increase retention. Services provided include staff development workshops and substitutes or \$30/hour for participating teachers. For more information on TLC Team services, see <http://ccsdtlc.org/TLCTeamServices.pdf>.



Some examples of how data have been used to impact working conditions at the local level include:

- NC used its Teacher Working Conditions Survey data to rewrite standards for principals and teachers. Local school leadership training now requires administrators to use survey data when making building-level improvement decisions.
- State leaders in Massachusetts allocated \$200,000 to support the use of TLC Survey data in struggling school districts. At the local level, at least one district changed its professional development offerings in response to the survey results.

not ask for demographic information including content area or specialization cannot be disaggregated according to whether it was completed by general or special educators. This is because NTC surveys in North Carolina, Massachusetts, WS/F County and other states and districts focus on building-level working conditions as a *whole*, with the assumption that efforts to improve working conditions impact *all* staff, regardless of whether they are general or special education staff. Even though Clark County’s TLC Online Survey gathers limited demographic data, results are not disaggregated at the building level for fear of compromising the anonymity of participants.

All three of these surveys are based on the notion that special education-specific issues will arise, as needed, during building- and district-level discussions about survey results and strategies for improving working conditions. For example, in response to TLC data, several Clark County schools now solicit teacher input prior to pairing general with special education “co-teachers.” Results from WS/F County have also been used to reduce special education paperwork via creation of an electronic IEP form, as well as to convene a Classified Staff Advisory Board in addition to its Teacher Advisory Board and ensure special education representation on both.

SESM’s approach, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that special education personnel encounter uniquely challenging working conditions that are best addressed by specific survey questions (as opposed to a generic NTC-type survey), as well as by comparisons of general and special education personnel responses. For example, districts in California that administer the CSCS will now also receive a supplementary report comparing all survey results (including SESM results) provided by staff serving students with individualized education programs (IEPs) with all other staff.

For more information on what one study found out about the retention of qualified special education personnel in California, see:

Futernick, K. (2007). A possible dream: Retaining California’s teachers so all students learn. Sacramento, California State University: Author. (http://www.calstate.edu/teacherquality/documents/possible_dream.pdf).

ADDRESSING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Working conditions surveys do not all address the needs of special educators in the same way. Results from the NTC’s Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey, for example, because the survey does





Personnel Improvement Center

National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities

PIC STAFF

Phoebe Gillespie, Ph.D., Director
Bill East, Ed.D., Principal Investigator
Eve Müller, Ph.D., Researcher/Writer
Leila Richey, M.A., Communications Manager
Christine Cashman, M.Ed., Recruitment/Outreach
Coordinator
Donna Reynolds, Project Assistant

STATE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Lisa Churchill, Ph.D.
Fred DeMay, M.Ed.
George Ann Rice, Ed.D.

Acknowledgments. The PIC gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the following individuals for participating in interviews and reviewing an earlier version of this document: Lisa Churchill, Facilitator for California Strategic Plan for Recruitment, Preparation and Retention of Special Education Personnel; Sam Dempsey, Division Director for Exception Children's Services, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, North Carolina; Eric Hirsch, New Teacher Center; and Cindy Johnson, Project Facilitator, Clark County School District, Nevada.



This practice brief is part of a series intended to provide examples of how states and localities throughout the nation are employing recruitment and retention strategies to address personnel shortages in the area of special education, early intervention and related services. The series was produced by the Personnel Improvement Center (PIC) and highlights recruitment and retention efforts within states and localities supported by the PIC. There are no copyright restrictions on these practice briefs, but the PIC requests that proper citation be used.

