



IS TEACHER STRESS A POLICY PROBLEM?



If you've been paying attention to news about K-12 education, you've probably seen the survey results:

Teachers are **twice as stressed** as other American employees. Teacher **job satisfaction** is at an all-time low. Ninety percent of NEA members say **feeling burned out** is a serious problem.

Often, the solutions proposed to issues of teacher morale are focused squarely on educators and the schools where they work. *Be joyful, inspire and praise* your teachers, school leaders are advised in a **slide deck** posted on the website of the Connecticut Department of Education. *Bring a co-worker lunch*, suggests a **teacher blog**. *Organize faculty outings*, a teacher proposes on **Edutopia**.

As helpful as suggestions that focus on individual teachers and administrators may be, they are insufficient because at least some of the root causes of low teacher morale are systemic forces that need to be addressed at a broader level.

In a **recent commentary**, NEPC Fellow **Amy Farley** and **Leah Chamberlain**, both of the University of Cincinnati, make the case that state-level education policy may have an important impact on levels of teacher stress.

Using sleep duration as a proxy for well-being, Farley and Chamberlain drew upon data from 7,836 teachers who participated in the 2013 and 2014 Center for Disease Control Survey Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System to demonstrate that teachers were more likely to get inadequate sleep (less than six hours per night) in states that implemented certain education policies.

For example, in states awarded federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funding (a key Obama ad-

ministration initiative that incentivized policies including test-score-based teacher evaluations and rigorous standards), teachers were 41 percent more likely than their counterparts in non-RTTT states to report inadequate sleep. (In the meantime, a [report](#) released by the Institute for Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of Education's research arm, found no evidence that the program had a long-term impact on student achievement.)

In states that sanctioned lower-performing schools, teachers were 43 percent more likely to report inadequate sleep than were their peers in states that did not support this practice.

And in states that approved Common Core State Standards-aligned materials, teachers were 36 percent more likely to report less than six hours of sleep than were their counterparts in states that did not do so.

The authors note that these are associational, not causal, findings. The results, therefore, might be due to underlying negative conditions in those states that were more likely to adopt the studied policies.

In addition to proposing further research that uses health-related data to explore teachers' working conditions, Farley and Chamberlain suggest that teachers should play a bigger role in developing policies, rather than being asked to merely shoulder the burden of implementing reforms they did not create and do not necessarily support.

"Teachers largely perceive policy as something that happens *to them*, often with disastrous results," they write.

Farley and Chamberlain also suggest that it may be time to develop a counter-narrative that emphasizes the very real joys of the teaching profession.

"While we need teachers to advocate for change and share their voices to the burgeoning discussion of teacher stress, we also need a more comprehensive and nuanced discussion of teaching that goes well beyond the current narratives," they write. "Counter-narratives can then highlight the joys of being in the classroom rather than allowing the stresses or challenges to be the sole story."

NEPC Resources on Teacher Employment and Retention

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