



# Alabama Take20 Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey:

## Interim Report

Submitted to the Alabama State Department of Education

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## Introduction

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have long realized that teaching quality is the most important variable for the success of students. But without supportive school environments where educators are valued, trusted and have the time and ability to collaborate to improve instruction, even the best teachers will be challenged. Policymakers have paid little attention to the teaching conditions in schools (Hanushek and Rivken, 2007) that are so critical to teacher retention and student success. A growing body of research clearly demonstrates that assessing, understanding and improving teaching conditions have many benefits.

- **Improved Student Learning:** Teachers' success with students is facilitated by positive teaching conditions, such as support from leadership and being in a collaborative working environment. Several statewide studies have demonstrated that the presence of positive work environments is significantly connected to increased student achievement (Hirsch and Emerck 2007, 2006a,b). In particular, having strong, trusting relationships—both internally and externally (Bryk and Schneider, 2002)—and supportive school leadership are essential to improving student achievement. A recent study of 88 urban public schools demonstrates the importance of communication networks for improved student achievement: in schools where teachers talked to each other the most about their jobs and where the principals did the best job of staying in touch with the community, students had noticeably higher reading and math test scores. These communication networks had a greater impact on test scores than the experience or credentials of the staff (Leana and Pil, 2006).
- **Improved Teacher Efficacy and Motivation:** Teachers' perceptions of their school are their reality; therefore, teachers' behavior and efficacy are a direct result of those views. In a recent literature review on teaching conditions, Leithwood (2006) found that teacher efficacy is significantly shaped by teaching conditions and that burnout and teacher engagement are critical to classroom performance and job satisfaction. He notes, "What teachers actually do in their schools and classrooms depends on how teachers perceive and respond to their working conditions."
- **Improved Teacher Retention:** Teachers who leave schools cite an opportunity for a better teaching assignment, dissatisfaction with support from administrators and dissatisfaction with workplace conditions as the main reasons why they seek other opportunities (NCES, 2004, Ingersoll, 2005, Marvel et al., 2006). Teachers indicate that a positive, collaborative school climate and support from colleagues and administrators are the most important factors influencing whether they stay in a school (Hirsch & Emerick 2007, 2006a,b). Research has linked teachers' negative perceptions of working conditions with their exit from schools. Teaching conditions such as facilities, safety, and quality of leadership have a greater effect on teacher mobility than salary (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2007). In particular, it appears that supportive school leaders who create trusting environments where educators are engaged in decision making impacts the latter group's decisions about where to work (Hirsch & Emerick 2007, 2006a,b).
- **New Recruitment Strategies to Entice Educators to Work in Hard-to-Staff Schools:** Teachers who are willing to teach in hard-to-staff schools indicate that strong supportive school leadership, an engaged community and parents, safety and working conditions are all

important factors when selecting where to work. Further, when Alabama educators in a previous study were asked about incentives that would attract them to schools, non-financial incentives, such as guaranteed planning time and reduced class sizes, were found to be more powerful recruitment incentives than salary supplements and bonuses (Hirsch, 2006c). Improving teaching conditions could also bolster the teacher supply pool because many educators who left due to poor conditions might come back if such conditions were enhanced. A recent survey of 2,000 educators from California found that 28 percent of teachers who left the profession before retirement indicated that they would come back if improvements were made to teaching and learning conditions. Monetary incentives were found to be less effective in luring them back (Futernick, 2007).

To help ensure that all students thrive, teachers need to work in schools designed for success. Positive teaching conditions, where educators are supported and empowered, are essential to creating schools where teachers want to work and students can learn.

### **About the Survey**

To assess whether these conditions are present, at the recommendation of the Governor's Commission on Quality Teaching and in partnership with numerous educator and stakeholder groups, the Alabama State Department of Education conducted its first statewide survey of teaching and learning conditions in 2008. The survey, which was administered through the New Teacher Center at the University of California at Santa Cruz in January and February 2008, was sent to all school-based, licensed educators throughout the state of Alabama. The Alabama Take20 Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey provides data to schools, districts, and the state about whether educators have the supportive school environments necessary for them to continue working and be successful with students. By hearing directly from educators who intimately understand teaching conditions, policymakers will have the opportunity to make data-driven decisions to develop policies that make Alabama schools great places to work and learn.

The Alabama Take20 Teaching and Learning Condition Survey included approximately ten<sup>1</sup> questions with multiple subparts, broken into six major sections: time, facilities and resources, decision-making, school leadership, professional development, and mentoring. There were also questions covering the demographics of respondents, such as position held, years of experience, and educational background. Surveys were administered to teachers, principals, vice principals, and other education professionals (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, social workers, library media specialists, etc.). Most of the questions were asked of all respondents, though some were asked only of specific groups. Only teachers in their first year and those indicating that they served as mentors were asked about induction. Further, a set of questions about district support in creating positive teaching conditions was asked specifically of principals.

The survey instrument was developed by the New Teacher Center with input and guidance from a committee established by the Alabama Department of Education that included educators and other policymakers and stakeholders representing groups such as the Alabama Education Association, A+ Education Foundation, Alabama Association of School Boards, and School Superintendents of Alabama. A set of core, validated questions from previous teaching conditions surveys was utilized, while others were developed specifically for the state.

Survey access codes were sent to all school-based educators in the State of Alabama. *Almost 30,000 Alabama educators (47 percent of all educators in the state) from across the state participated in the Alabama Take20 Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey.* This includes responses from 24,530 teachers, 702 principals, 562 assistant principals, and 2,393 other education professionals. Data is now available for 959 schools and 89 districts and provides critical information for making local and state level decisions to improve Alabama schools. Data is only released at the school level if at least 40 percent of the school faculty and a minimum of at least 5 educators, responded to the survey. Data for the state and school districts is publicly available at [www.take20alabama.org](http://www.take20alabama.org). Schools with a sufficient response rate received a password to access their data for their own school improvement planning. This survey data is unique in that it represents the perceptions of those who understand Alabama teaching and learning conditions best—the educators who experience them every day.

### **Organization of this Report**

While a final report is not expected until student achievement, teacher turnover and other state-provided data are available for analysis, several initial trends can be identified from the Take20 survey data. Major trends are highlighted across different groups of respondents.

First, a quick snapshot of educators’ overall impressions of teaching and learning conditions in Alabama schools is presented. Second, the relationship between teaching conditions and teacher employment plans is explored. Third, differences in perceptions between teachers and principals are assessed. Fourth, trends in the perceptions of educators in different school levels and with varying years of experience are discussed. Charts throughout the report highlight survey items where the greatest differences in perception about teaching and learning conditions emerged. Finally, key findings are presented for each area of the survey: school leadership, decision-making, professional development, mentoring, and time.

## Key Findings

Research supporting the impact of teaching conditions on retention and student learning bodes well for Alabama as, overall, Alabama teachers believe that their schools are good places to work and learn. Most teachers are generally satisfied with their current workplace. ***Nearly nine out of ten of teachers (87 percent) responding to this survey agree that their school is a good place to work and learn.*** More than half of survey respondents (58 percent) “strongly agree” with this statement. Consider the following:

- ***Alabama educators<sup>2</sup> are positive about their facilities and resources.*** At least three-quarters of Alabama educators note that they have sufficient instructional materials (79 percent), instructional technology (74 percent), communications technology (85 percent), and office equipment (76 percent). Educators also report working in schools that are safe (84 percent), clean and well maintained (78 percent).
- ***Educators are positive about the commitment of the faculty in their school.*** Eighty-seven percent of educators believe that the faculty is committed to helping every student learn. Three-quarters (75 percent) of Alabama educators believe that steps are taken in the school to solve problems.

That perceptions of teaching and learning conditions are positive on the whole is significant for understanding the relationship between such conditions and teachers’ future employment plans.

### Finding 1: Teaching Conditions Have an Impact on Teacher Employment Plans

The survey data demonstrates what individuals who work in schools already know: teaching conditions are a potentially powerful lever to help address teacher attrition. ***Overall, nine out of ten teachers (90 percent) responding to this survey indicated that they want to “stay” teaching at their school.*** Only six percent of respondents were “movers,” wanting to continue teaching but in a different school or district, while five percent were “leavers,” indicating that they plan to leave education all together.<sup>3</sup>

#### Factors Influencing Retention Decisions

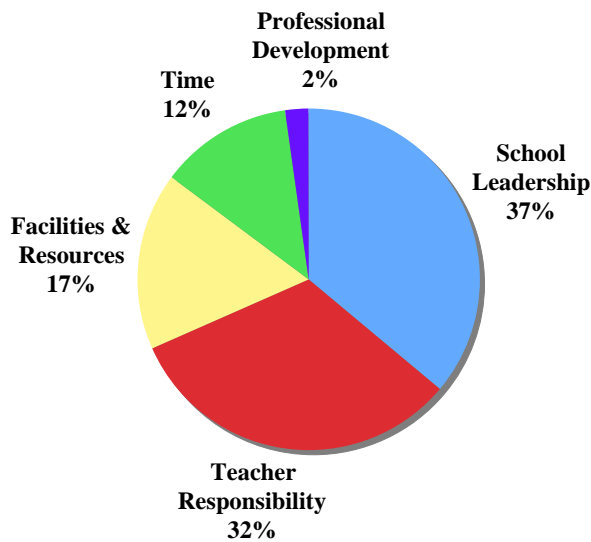
The survey includes two major questions addressing future employment plans. The first question asks teachers to rate how strongly they agree or disagree that certain factors influence their decisions about future professional plans. Here, ***teachers most frequently cited their sense of effectiveness in teaching (92 percent), followed closely by support from school leadership (90 percent) as factors influencing their future employment*** (Table 1). When responses were disaggregated by stayers, movers, and leavers, all three groups frequently cited the support received from school leadership. Both movers and leavers also frequently cited student behavior, while stayers cited teachers’ sense of effectiveness with students, teaching assignments and the collegiality of the school as important factors influencing their future employment plans. Salary, community, and parental support, while important, were *less* likely to shape teachers’ decisions about their future professional plans than other teaching conditions.

**Table 1**  
**Factors Influencing Teachers’ Future Employment Plans in Alabama**

<b>Factors Influencing Teachers' Decisions about Their Future Intentions for their Professional Career</b>	<b>Percent Agreeing, Overall</b>	<b>Percent “Strongly Agreeing”</b>
Effectiveness with the students I teach	91.7%	60.3%
Adequate support from school leadership	89.5%	63.1%
Teaching assignment (subject, students)	88.2%	54.5%
Collegial atmosphere amongst the staff	84.3%	49.2%
Adequate facilities and/or resources	83.4%	43.0%
Responsibility for decisions that affect my school and/or classroom	82.9%	42.2%
Benefits	79.2%	45.6%
Student behavior	78.4%	40.1%
Salary	70.7%	34.6%

In a second question about employment plans, teachers are asked to select between five options regarding which aspect of their work environment *most* affects their willingness to keep teaching at the same school: time during the work day, school facilities and resources, school leadership, teacher responsibility, and professional development. ***Over one-third (36 percent) of all teachers selected school leadership as the most important teaching condition to their willingness to continue working at their school*** (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Aspect of Working Conditions Alabama Teachers Believe is Most Important to Continue Teaching in Their School**



## Positive Perceptions of Teaching Conditions Are Linked to Staying

Evidence throughout the survey indicates that teachers with positive perceptions about their teaching conditions are much more likely to want to stay at their current school than teachers who are more negative, particularly in the areas of leadership and decision making (Table 2). Leavers are more positive than movers, most likely because those who are leaving teaching do so not just due to dissatisfaction, but often for other non-teaching related causes (retirement, personal reasons, etc.).

**Table 2**  
**Differences in the Perceptions of Stayers, Movers and Leavers on Teaching Conditions Questions**

Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey	Percent of Educators Agreeing		
	Stayers	Movers	Leavers
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school.	71.2%	21.4%	46.1%
In this school we take steps to solve problems.	77.0%	32.6%	55.3%
School leadership shields teachers from disruptions, allowing teachers to focus on educating students.	68.5%	27.5%	45.3%
Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching.	77.9%	38.1%	57.9%
School leadership develops supportive community relationships.	78.2%	38.5%	58.2%

Table 2, which is organized in the order of the greatest difference between perceptions of stayers and movers across a variety of questions about teaching and learning conditions, shows that many of greatest differences in perceptions of teaching conditions are related to school leadership. Moreover, *twice as many stayers agree with positive statements about school leadership than do movers*. For example, while around one-third (33 percent) of movers agree that “in this school we take steps to solve problems,” over three-quarters (77 percent) of stayers agree with the same statement. Differences were greater between stayers and movers than stayers and leavers, given that leavers’ perceptions were generally more positive than those of movers.

The data shows that disparities between stayers and movers are visible not just in whether teaching conditions are present, but in whether or not school leadership makes efforts to improve such conditions. *Teachers who want to stay in their school are far more likely than those who want to move to believe that school leadership is working to improve teaching and learning conditions* (Table 3). While about two-thirds of teachers who want to stay believe that leadership is addressing empowering teachers (64 percent) and time (65 percent), only about one-quarter of movers believe the same statement to be true (22 percent and 25 percent, respectively).

**Table 3**  
**Differences in Perceptions of Stayers, Movers and Leavers about School Leadership Efforts to Address Teachers’ Concerns about Teaching and Learning Conditions**

School Leadership Makes a Sustained Effort to Address Teacher Concerns About:	Percent of Educators Agreeing		
	Stayers	Movers	Leavers
Empowering teachers	64.4%	21.9%	37.3%
The use of time in the school	65.0%	25.3%	39.7%
Leadership issues	61.0%	21.6%	37.3%
New teacher support	68.8%	31.5%	46.6%
Facilities and resources	70.8%	34.6%	47.4%
Professional development	75.0%	42.9%	53.3%

**Note:** Responses are organized in the order of the greatest difference between perceptions of stayers and movers in response to this question on the survey.

School leadership, it appears, is important to teachers in terms of their future employment plans. Unfortunately, school administrators and teachers may not share similar perceptions as to whether teaching conditions are in place and efforts toward improvement occur.

### **Finding 2: Teachers View Working Conditions Differently from Administrators**

While some differences in perceptions of working conditions can be expected between “bosses” and “employees” in any industry, the disparity between principals and teachers is notable in Alabama. *On all questions, the 702 principals responding to the survey were far more likely than the approximately 24,530 teachers to note the presence of positive teaching conditions, such as leadership making efforts to improve conditions in their schools* (Tables 4 and 5).

Over 80 percent of teachers and principals agreed that: (1) school leadership encourages the faculty to meet high performance standards (88 percent of teachers, 99 percent of principals); (2) the faculty are committed to helping every student learn (87 and 95 percent, respectively); and (3) school leadership facilitates the use of data to improve student learning (85 and 98 percent, respectively). All of these statements are related to school leadership.

At least one third of principals and half of teachers agreed that teachers play a “small role” in making the following kinds of decisions in their schools: hiring new staff and faculty (57 percent of principals and 81 percent of teachers), creating school schedules (34 percent and 68 percent), and making decisions about teaching assignments (44 percent and 49 percent).

As shown in Table 4, the greatest gaps in perception between teachers and principals appear to be in the areas of school leadership and decision making – the same two areas that teachers said were most important to them in making decisions regarding their future employment plans (Figure 1).

**Table 4**  
**Teacher and Principal Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Conditions**

Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey Questions	Percent Agreeing	
	Teachers	Principals
Reasoned education risk-taking is encouraged and supported	50.0%	86.0%
Determining the focus of professional development (teachers play a large or primary role)	34.2%	70.2%
School leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct	62.7%	98.1%
Continuous improvement planning (teachers play a large or primary role)	51.8%	85.4%
School leadership shields teachers from disruptions, allowing teachers to focus on educating students	65.0%	97.6%
Teachers are centrally involved in decision-making about educational issues	61.3%	92.9%
Establishing and implementing school-wide discipline policies and procedures (teachers play a large or primary role)	26.4%	57.1%
Aligning school resources with the continuous improvement plan (teachers play a large or primary role)	36.4%	67.0%
Making decisions about teaching assignments (teachers play a large or primary role)	32.7%	27.5%

Table 4 is organized in order of the greatest difference between teachers and principals' perceptions. These findings do not imply that principals do not want to address teaching and learning conditions in their schools, but rather that they do not perceive they are issues to the same extent as teachers. Therefore, it should be no surprise that more has not been done to prioritize these issues. School level data, ideally, can help facilitate the kinds of dialogue where the school faculty can come to greater consensus about the presence of teaching and learning conditions.

***Principals are not only more likely to believe that positive working conditions are present, but also that school leadership—a concept that includes, but is not limited entirely to the principal—makes sustained efforts to address any teacher concerns that exist*** (Table 5). Consider the convergence of findings related to school leadership:

- First, as previously noted, educators indicate that school leadership and teacher responsibility (decision making) are the most critical influences on future employment plans (see Figure 1).
- Second, principals tend to be more positive about teaching and learning conditions in their schools than teachers (Table 4).
- Third, teachers believe that school leadership efforts to address working conditions are least likely to occur in the areas of leadership (58 percent), empowerment (61 percent), and time (61 percent) (Table 5).
- Fourth, the greatest gaps between teacher and principal perception about school leadership efforts to address teacher concerns are in the areas of leadership and teacher empowerment

(38 and 36 percent difference, respectively) (Table 5). Principals are more likely to believe that sustained efforts are being made by the leadership to address such concerns.

**Table 5**  
**Teacher and Principal Perceptions of School Leadership Efforts to Address Teaching and Learning Conditions**

School Leadership Makes a Sustained Effort to Address Teacher Concerns About:	Percent Agreeing	
	Teachers	Principals
Leadership issues	57.6%	95.6%
Empowering teachers	60.5%	96.9%
The use of time in my school	61.5%	95.9%
New teacher support	65.6%	96.4%
Facilities and resources	67.6%	96.3%
Professional development	72.1%	96.1%

Table 5 is organized in order of the greatest difference between teachers and principals’ perceptions. These wide disparities between the perceptions of principals and teachers have been documented in other studies of working conditions (Hirsch & Emerick 2007, 2006a,b). The data here indicate a need to consider leadership and empowerment in school improvement planning. These findings also call for school-based, data-driven conversations of working conditions, as well as professional development for both principals and teacher leaders. Until all educators can agree on the relative presence of working conditions, sustained reforms to improve school climate will not be prioritized.

### **Finding 3: Teachers’ Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Conditions Vary by School Level and Years of Experience**

School leadership clearly shapes teaching conditions in Alabama schools. Other factors too—years of experience and school level—appear to influence perceptions of whether or not critical teaching conditions are in place within a school.

#### **Differences by School Level**

- *Elementary school educators are more likely to note the presence of many important teaching and learning conditions in their school than middle and high school educators.* Elementary school educators are more likely to note the presence of positive teaching conditions in the areas of professional development, facilities and resources, school leadership, and decision making. For example, elementary educators are more likely than their middle or high school counterparts to agree that school leadership facilitates the use of data to improve student learning, that teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching, that the physical environment of classrooms in their school supports teaching and learning, and that teachers participate in structured opportunities to learn from one another (Table 6).

- *Elementary teachers are less likely than middle and high school teachers to report that they have sufficient time in their school day to meet the needs of all of their students.* For example, fewer elementary educators note that the teachers in their schools have sufficient non-instructional time or adequate instructional time during the regular school work day to meet the educational needs of all students.

**Table 6**  
**Percentage of Educators Agreeing Teaching and Learning Conditions Are Present by School Level**

Teaching and Learning Conditions Questions	Percent Agreeing by Level		
	Elementary	Middle	High
Professional learning opportunities are driven by analysis of student learning data	84.8%	75.1%	64.6%
Teachers participate in structured opportunities to learn from one another	69.4%	62.3%	50.7%
Professional development provides teachers with the knowledge and skills most needed to teach effectively	80.2%	72.7%	62.9%
Teachers have adequate instructional time during the regular school work day to meet the educational needs of all students.	60.1%	68.3%	76.4%
The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient.	36.7%	48.5%	53.0%
Establishing and implementing school-wide discipline policies and procedures	32.6%	27.6%	17.3%
Enhancing teacher knowledge and skills is a priority strategy for increasing student achievement at this school	87.9%	81.3%	72.9%
School leadership facilitates the use of data to improve student learning	90.7%	85.2%	76.1%
Aligning school resources with the continuous improvement plan (teachers play a large or primary role)	42.7%	38.9%	28.3%
The physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning	80.3%	73.1%	67.5%

### Differences by Teacher Experience

*The least experienced teachers are the most likely to agree that positive teaching and learning conditions are present in their school.* On most questions, teachers in their first three years are slightly more positive than their colleagues about time, decision making, leadership, and professional development issues (with first year teachers usually having the most positive perceptions). Teachers with four to ten years experience were the least likely to believe that critical conditions of work are present in their schools (Table 7). The most veteran teachers –

those with 20 or more years of experience – were typically more positive than teachers with 4-20 years experience, but usually less so than novice teachers.

**Table 7**  
**Percentage of Educators Agreeing Teaching and Learning Conditions Are Present**  
**by Teacher Experience**

Teaching and Learning Conditions Questions	Percent Agreeing by Experience					
	First Year	2 - 3 Years	4 - 6 Years	7 - 10 Years	11 - 20 Years	20+ Years
School leadership selects the highest quality teachers available to fill faculty positions.	84.8%	77.7%	72.0%	70.3%	69.3%	68.1%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school.	78.8%	72.5%	67.0%	66.5%	66.7%	68.4%
The broader community recognizes and respects teachers as professionals.	72.0%	64.5%	61.4%	60.3%	60.7%	66.0%
School leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct.	74.4%	67.2%	62.5%	62.7%	64.2%	66.0%
Teachers participate in structured opportunities to learn from one another.	71.5%	65.5%	61.7%	61.0%	61.2%	63.2%
Opportunities for advancement within the teaching profession (other than administration) are available to me.	57.2%	53.1%	48.4%	47.3%	44.9%	45.7%
Reasoned education risk-taking is encouraged and supported.	59.3%	53.8%	53.0%	50.8%	50.9%	50.2%

Table 7 is organized in order of the greatest difference between first year teachers and those with 7-10 years experience. The greatest differences in perception by teacher experience were seen in school leadership, decision making, and professional development.

The following sections will further explore educators aggregated perceptions about support, resources and workload.

## **Finding 4: School leadership appears to be creating trusting and supportive environments for teachers across the state**

Analyses of the data demonstrate the importance of leadership in influencing teacher decisions to stay in schools, and many educators are positive about the quality of leadership in Alabama's schools. *Three-quarters (76 percent) of teachers believe that overall, school leadership in their school is effective.* As previously mentioned, nearly nine out of ten educators (88 percent) agree that school leadership encourages the faculty to meet high performance standards, while 85 percent perceive leadership as facilitating the use of data to improve student learning. Additionally:

- *Most teachers feel they work in trusting and supportive environments.* More than two-thirds (67 percent) agree that there is an atmosphere of trust in their school and three-quarters (75 percent) agree that school leadership develops supportive community relationships.
- *Teachers note that school leadership makes sustained efforts to address some concerns about teaching conditions.* While less than two-thirds of Alabama educators responding to this survey believe efforts are made to address leadership issues (58 percent) and empower teachers (61 percent), they are more positive about leadership efforts to improve facilities and resources (68 percent) and professional development (72 percent) (see Table 5). Unfortunately, educators are the least positive in the areas that are likely to have the greatest impact on teacher retention.

As discussed, school leadership is essential to teacher retention. The fact that so many educators are positive about the effectiveness of their school leadership and believe they work in trusting, supportive environments is a tremendous asset to the state. More analyses, however, will be conducted to better understand where teachers do not feel supportive and if there are other commonalities across those schools.

## **Finding 5: Alabama teachers feel engaged and participate in important decisions about their classroom, but are less involved in school choices.**

Teacher empowerment is viewed as critical to teacher success with students and also is a clear influence on teachers' future employment decisions. More than one-third of all Alabama teachers responding to this survey believe that teacher responsibility is the *most* important teaching condition for promoting student learning (39 percent) and the critical condition for teachers deciding to remain at their school (32 percent).

- **In general, teachers report being engaged in school decision-making.** Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of educators believe that teachers are centrally involved in decision-making about educational issues, and three-quarters agree that teachers are engaged in decisions about continuous school improvement (73 percent).

- **Educators report that teachers play a *large or the primary role* in issues that impact their professional practice within their classroom**, such as selecting instructional materials (60 percent) and developing teaching strategies (59 percent). (Table 8)
- **But educators report less teacher influence over decisions that affect their school**. Half of educators indicate that teachers play a *small or no role* at all in making decisions about teaching assignments (49 percent), and establishing discipline policies (49 percent). Over two-thirds report playing a *small or no role* in creating school schedules (68 percent) and hiring new faculty and staff (81 percent).

**Table 8  
Teacher Role in School Decision Making**

Please indicate how large a role teachers have at your school in each of the following areas:	Responses from AL Educators Surveyed				
	No role at all	Small role	Moderate role	Large role	Primary role
Selecting instructional materials and resources	3%	13%	31%	43%	11%
Identifying and/or developing best practice teaching strategies	2%	11%	25%	42%	19%
Setting school-wide grading and student assessment practices	11%	20%	29%	31%	9%
Determining the focus of professional development	10%	22%	32%	28%	7%
Establishing and implementing school-wide discipline policies and procedures	23%	24%	25%	22%	5%
Hiring new faculty and staff	56%	23%	13%	6%	1%
Creating school schedules	37%	29%	19%	11%	3%
Aligning school resources with the continuous improvement plan	11%	19%	31%	30%	8%
Making decisions about teaching assignments	27%	22%	19%	19%	13%

**Finding 6: Professional development is well received, though more may be needed to ensure teachers**

**Teachers are positive about importance of and their ability to pursue professional development.** Eight in ten teachers (82 percent) agree that professional development is a priority strategy for increasing student achievement at their school, while seven in ten agree that sufficient resources are available to allow teachers to pursue professional development activities (71 percent).

Teachers were asked about both their professional development needs and the areas in which they actually receive support. When asked to identify areas of professional development *needed* to teach effectively, Alabama teachers were most likely to cite technology (45 percent) and support around teaching students with disabilities (42 percent) (Table 9).

**Table 9**  
**Professional Development NEEDED by Teachers to Effectively Teach Their Students**

Professional Development NEEDED to teach effectively	Percent Agreeing
Technology	44.9%
Special education (students with disabilities)	41.6%
Closing the achievement gap	36.7%
Teaching strategies related to my content or my discipline	35.6%
Reading/literacy strategies	29.9%
Classroom Management	26.7%
English as a Second Language (ESL)	24.6%
Student assessment/progress monitoring	19.3%
Special education (academically gifted students)	17.7%
Ethnic and cultural diversity	12.0%

Teachers were also asked to cite areas where they *received* 10 hours or more of professional development in the past two years (Table 10). Only in reading/literacy strategies (57 percent) and discipline-related teaching strategies (50 percent) did half of educators received such training (Table 9). While 42 percent of teachers cited a need for professional development around teaching students with disabilities, only 23 percent noted that they had received at least 10 hours of training over the last two years in this area.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 10**  
**Professional Development RECEIVED by Teachers over the Last Two Years**

Professional Development RECEIVED (at least 10 hours over last 2 years)	Percent Agreeing
Reading/literacy strategies	56.5%
Teaching strategies related to my content or my discipline	49.9%
Technology	48.0%
Student assessment/progress monitoring	35.9%
Special education (students with disabilities)	22.5%
Closing the achievement gap	19.8%
Classroom Management	18.3%
Ethnic and cultural diversity	8.4%
English as a Second Language (ESL)	7.7%
Special education (academically gifted students)	4.7%

Such gaps in learning needs and professional development received may be related to teachers' role in planning and delivering professional learning opportunities. *One-quarter of teachers responding*

*to the survey perceived themselves as playing a “small role” or “no role at all” in planning or delivering the professional learning they have engaged in over the last two years (29 percent)* (Table 8). Despite this unmet need, teachers are positive that professional development is providing them with the knowledge and skills they need to teach effectively (73 percent).

In addition to asking all teachers questions about professional development support, first year teachers were asked about the quality and duration of mentoring in their schools.

### **Finding 7: New teachers receiving mentoring found it helpful**

Around 1,200 first-year teachers answered specific questions focusing on whether or not they had a mentor, if the mentoring support they received was effective, what kinds of support activities mentors provided, as well as questions related to the overall impact of the mentor. Nearly nine in ten (86 percent) of beginning teachers responding to the survey report having received a mentor.

**Novice teachers found their mentors provided effective support in most areas.** Of those receiving support, at least eight in ten new teachers believed effective support was provided in modeling professionalism (87 percent), understanding policies and procedures (86 percent), providing personal and emotional support (85 percent), devising instructional strategies (84 percent), creating discipline strategies (82 percent), and completing new teacher processes and documentation (80 percent).

- More than half (59 percent) of the first year teachers who reported having a mentor worked together with that mentor at least one hour per week, and almost one third (31 percent) collaborated more than two hours per week.
- Four-fifths (88 percent) were able to develop a respectful and trusting relationship with their mentor.

**Mentors help retain new teachers.** About two-thirds (64 percent) of new Alabama teachers agree that their mentoring experience was important in their decision to remain in teaching at their school.

### **Finding 8: Teachers need time to plan and work with colleagues and to get all students to expected levels of performance**

Quality teaching depends not only upon having sufficient support but also upon having enough time and a workload that facilitates effective teaching. Teachers need time to collaborate with their peers and to address the needs of diverse learners.

Less than half (42 percent) of responding educators believe that the *non-instructional* time (time without student contact that could be used for planning, meetings, etc.) Alabama teachers receive is sufficient, and only one-third (35 percent) agree that they had adequate time to collaborate with colleagues.

- Approximately three-quarters (74 percent) of Alabama teachers report receiving, on average, five or fewer hours of non-instructional time in an average week (equivalent to 1 hour or less per day).
- *The non-instructional time that is received may not be used to improve student learning, due to time demands for completing paperwork and other duties.* Fewer than half (40 percent) of the educators responding to this survey believe that efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork required of teachers.
- Finally, *Alabama educators note that substantial time is required to address the needs of diverse learners and getting teachers to expected levels of performance.* Almost three-quarters (70 percent) of the teachers and principals responding to this survey “strongly agree” that getting students to meet performance expectations contributes to their overall workload. Student assessment requirements (58 percent strongly agree) and compliance with No Child Left Behind (57 percent strongly agree) were also noted as significant workload contributors.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

On the whole, *Alabama educators were highly positive about their teaching and learning conditions.* That is to say, most answers are skewed to the positive and there are far fewer negative responses than would occur in a normal statistical distribution of responses. There are several possible reasons why this tendency could arise. The first is that respondents are indeed more content with their working conditions than is typically found (e.g., in other state surveys). Alternatively, there may have been some selection factor that explains why the half of the educator population who took the survey is made up of a predominantly satisfied group. For example, those educators with the most positive attitudes about the teaching and learning conditions in their schools may have felt more inclined to respond to this survey. Another possible explanation is that responding educators did not fully trust or understand the anonymity of their individual responses to the survey and thus felt compelled to respond more positively than they might have otherwise. Alabama policymakers should also consider the following questions, which may offer possible explanations: Under what conditions did teachers respond to the survey? What procedures were used to administer the survey? For instance, mass survey taking as opposed to individual survey taking may have had an impact on survey responses.

While more analyses remain, the initial examination of the survey data suggests that Alabama has a solid foundation of committed educators, and comprehensive, sustained efforts to improve teaching and learning conditions will ensure that the state’s educators are able to help every child in Alabama learn.

The Alabama Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey data can help the state, districts, and schools assess, understand and improve their teaching and learning conditions in order to foster improved perceptions, motivations and performance in schools. Ultimately, this will create positive school environments where all educators are supported, want to work and can thrive.

A final report, analyzing the findings of the survey relative to student learning and teacher retention, will be submitted in the fall 2008 after student achievement, teacher turnover and other state-provided data can be analyzed. For the final report, more in-depth analyses will occur in the following areas:

- In domain-specific analyses, we will delve into teachers' perceptions of leadership abilities and empowerment opportunities within their schools, with an understanding that these two areas are critical in teachers' future employment plans.
- Using student achievement data, we will further analyze how educators' perceptions of working conditions align with student learning.
- We will continue to explore how the time constraints on Alabama's teachers impact both their own job satisfaction and student learning. For instance, when issues affecting retention are considered, time ranks fourth in teachers' career decisions, but climbs to a close second behind empowerment when teachers are asked which working condition most greatly impacts student learning.

While some additional data will be provided in the final report, readers are encouraged to use these interim findings to begin the important conversations that will lead to improvement in the teaching and learning conditions in their schools. Having a qualified teacher for every student is not enough to close the achievement gap. Teachers must have the resources and support they need to serve all students well. We look forward to continuing our support of Alabama's most critical educational resource—its dedicated teaching corps.

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## Appendix A: Guide to Using the Data

It is important to consider the following when analyzing and using the Alabama Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey results for your school improvement efforts.

**1. Teaching Conditions are an area for school improvement, not accountability.** Because teaching conditions are about schools, no one individual should be held solely accountable for the status of the school culture. Rather, these data should be used to guide school improvement planning with schools and then assessed on their progress toward implementing collectively developed reforms.

**2. Teaching conditions are not about any one individual and it will take a community effort to improve these conditions.** No one person should be viewed as responsible for creating or reforming school culture. Conditions are about schools, not about individuals. The principal can have a significant impact on the professional culture in which teachers work, but many aspects of teaching conditions are beyond the principal's control. Broader social trends, federal, state and district policies all impact how educators view and operate within their school and classroom.

**3. Perceptual data are real data.** The survey results are based on educators' perceptions of the presence of important teaching conditions. Educators' perceptions of the culture and context of their schools have been linked in a number of studies to student learning, future employment plans, efficacy and motivation. Furthermore, given that educators base their decisions to stay in or leave teaching upon their perceptions, this data should help inform school improvement and reform efforts at the school, district and state levels. However, other data (e.g., instructional expenditures, teacher/pupil ratio, etc.) should be used to triangulate these findings and provide a better understanding of these perceptions.

**4. Conversations need to be structured and safe.** Having data-driven dialogue about the findings of the survey, the root causes of educator perceptions, and potential reforms will require structure, facilitation, setting ground rules and the ability to separate the issues from individuals. Dialogue should occur so that all can participate in a safe and meaningful way.

**5. Identify and celebrate positives as well as considering areas for improvement.** Educators have tremendous pride in the work they do and all want to work in a school that allows them to do their best work. All schools have strengths that should be acknowledged and celebrated during school improvement efforts at the same time as issues are identified and addressed.

**6. Create a common understanding of what defines and shapes conditions.** Anything and everything might be considered a part of and influence on teaching conditions. The survey provides input from educators on a host of important research-based teaching conditions, which should serve as a starting point for understanding what is important to teachers for them to do their best work. Research shows that broader social trends, media coverage, respect for the profession, local and state policies, etc. can all influence teachers' perceptions of their conditions and ultimately their motivation and efficacy as educators. Other areas may be worthy of further investigation, such as teaching assignments, curricular support, assessments and accountability, parent and community support, etc.

**7. Focus on what you can solve.** Many issues that shape teaching conditions within a school or district are subject to federal and state assessment policies, funding, etc. To be successful, school improvement planning should focus on areas that can be addressed by the school community. District barriers to school-based solutions, as well as challenges related to state or federal policy or broader societal concerns should be identified and used to facilitate cross-school conversations.

**8. Solutions can be complex and long term.** Teaching conditions are cumulative and engrained over time. It took many years and faculty members to create them and it may take a similar amount of time to reform them. Some solutions may be inexpensive and simple to address, like improving the consistency of communication amongst faculty, while others are resource intensive (e.g., class size reduction, integration of technology) or long range (e.g., building trust, creating authentic professional learning communities). A school improvement plan must pay attention both to short and long term issues to successfully improve the professional context.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The number of questions answered by any one respondent depended on their years of experience and their role in the school (teacher, principal, etc.). Educators may have answered up to 200 specific items about their school.

<sup>2</sup> “Educators” is used in this report only to refer to the aggregated responses all school-based licensed educators who responded to the survey. There were four groups of professionals completing this survey: teachers, principals, vice or assistant principals, and other school-based licensed education professionals.

<sup>3</sup> 24,398 educators responded to a question about their future intentions for their professional career. “Stayers” were those who planned to continue working in their current school either as long as possible or until a better opportunity came along; “movers” planned to leave the school or district as soon as possible but to continue working in education; and, “leavers” planned to leave education all together.

<sup>4</sup> One must be careful when making comparisons between the stated professional development needs of teachers and the areas where they noted receiving professional development. This is true for a number of reasons. One is that teachers might not always be aware that a certain kind of professional development was meant to cover the topics we asked about, like closing the achievement gap. Second, it is possible that the needs of respondents are actually underestimated: if teachers *received* professional development in a particular area, they might have decided not to indicate it as a *need*, even if they felt it was important. Alternatively, teachers may be confirming that they have a need for a particular kind of professional development that they are actually receiving.