



A Union of Professionals



2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey





The **Badass Teachers Association (BATs)** is a national grass-roots education activist organization with over 200,000 in our network. BATs mission statement clearly states we are educators who refuse to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality. BATs are educators who refuse to accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning.



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OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey

Executive Summary

In 2015, the **American Federation of Teachers** and the **Badass Teachers Association** conducted an 80-question survey of 30,000 teachers and school staff on the quality of their work life, in response to concerns regarding work stress that educators had reported. Our 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey was shortened to 30 questions. This year, we surveyed a random sample of 830 AFT members as well as educators in two New York school districts where educator unions have built strong collaborative labor-management practices. More than 4,000 additional educators responded to a public version of the survey online.

Educator Stress Matters

Safe, welcoming, healthy schools flourish when teachers and school staff are empowered by support and respect on the job. Educator working conditions have a direct effect on the learning environment of our students. Teaching is a difficult job, and working conditions are a strong predictor of teacher turnover—more so than other factors like teaching in a high-poverty school. Studies have shown that teachers in high-poverty schools with good, supportive working conditions are likely to stay.¹ The people who know teachers best—those who are part of their school and local communities—respect them the most. There's a large and growing body of research that shows that community engagement and collaborative practices in schools and districts improve student outcomes.² We can ensure safe, welcoming, supportive learning environments for kids when communities, parents, educators and administrators work together to build supportive working environments for teachers and school staff.

Fostering safe, welcoming environments in schools is even more critical in our current political climate. A study released by UCLA in October 2017 shows that since January's presidential inauguration, high school teachers across the United States are reporting more stress, anxiety and bullying among their students than before.³ Teachers in the UCLA survey called for more support from school leadership, as well as from national, state and local leaders, to encourage greater civil discourse and understanding. Our 2017 survey suggests that educator stress has also increased since the election. In 2015, 34 percent of our respondents noted that their mental health was "not good" for seven or more of the past 30 days. In 2017, among the more than 4,000 respondents to the public version of our survey, that number had climbed to 58 percent.

2017 Survey Highlights

Our 2017 survey demonstrates that schools still struggle to provide educators and, by extension, students with healthy and productive environments. Districts that fail to recognize the importance of educator well-being may be faced with higher turnover, more teacher and staff health issues, and greater burnout, all of which leads to higher costs, less stability for kids and, ultimately, lower student achievement.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- The people who know teachers the best—parents, co-workers and students—showed much more respect for teachers than elected officials and media members, many of whom rarely set foot in a classroom.
- While educators felt most respected by their colleagues, they also indicated that their direct supervisors showed them much more respect than their school boards, the media, elected officials and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (86 percent of respondents did not feel respected by DeVos).
- While the majority of educators felt they had moderate to high control over basic decisions within their classroom, their level of influence and control dropped significantly on policy decisions that directly impact their classroom, such as setting discipline policy, setting performance standards and deciding how resources are spent. This lack of voice over important instructional decisions is a tangible example of the limited respect policymakers have for educators.
- Policies that support healthy interactions in schools are tremendously important. The survey found that educators experience workplace bullying at a much higher rate—more than three times as high—than other workers. While most educators reported that their schools have workplace harassment policies prohibiting bullying, a smaller proportion of respondents said that their schools or districts offered regular training on bullying.
- These and other factors contribute to an unhealthy work environment. Teachers reported having poor mental health for 11 or more days per month at twice the rate of the general U.S. workforce. They also reported lower-than-recommended levels of health outcomes and sleep per night.
- The stressful workload, the feeling of having to be "always on," the lack of resources, and the burden of ever-changing expectations take a toll on educators, and the health problems educators face are compounded by deficient building conditions, equipment and staff shortages, and insufficient time to prepare and collaborate with colleagues.
- Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that strong educator unions are vital.

Educators responding to our survey across the country report limited feelings of respect, control and influence in their work, but there are also signs that this is a problem that can be addressed. Forthcoming research from Saul Rubinstein and John McCarthy shows that union-district partnerships produce increased school-level collaborative environments and, in turn, improved student outcomes.⁴

We surveyed educators in two New York school districts—the Solvay Union Free School District and the North Syracuse Central School District—that have high levels of collaboration, including vibrant teacher mentoring programs and peer evaluation systems. Our survey shows that educators in these districts:

- Were less likely to find work “always” stressful.
- Felt that they had good mentoring and support systems, especially for new teachers.
- Felt more respected by their supervisors.
- Were significantly less likely to be bullied by their supervisor.
- Slept about 15 minutes more each night.
- Felt better about their work-life balance, and were more likely to say that it is not hard to take time off to address personal or family matters.
- Were less likely to say they planned to leave the profession, especially among young teachers.

Since President Trump took office, stress and anxiety in schools is on the rise, and we now have a secretary of education who educators in our survey overwhelmingly feel does not respect them. State and federal cuts to education spending will only make things worse. The first step toward reducing educator and student stress is to find out what is happening in our schools, and to build good, collaborative labor-management relationships. Collaboration requires time and trust. Top-down, mandated “quick fixes” do not work. School districts, school communities and education unions can play a role in improving educators’ working conditions and students’ learning environments. Educators feel most respected by the people closest to their work—those within their school communities—suggesting that the opportunity exists for districts, schools and parents to work together with educators and their unions on a path forward to a supportive and safe learning environment for every child.

Endnotes

1 J. Papay & M. Kraft. (2017). “Developing Workplaces Where Teachers Stay.” Teaching in Context.

2 E. Quintero, ed. (2017). Teaching in Context.

3 J. Rogers. (2017). “Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump: Increasing Stress and Hostility in America’s High Schools.” UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

4 S. Rubinstein & J. McCarthy. (2017). “National Study on Union-Management Partnerships and Educator Collaboration in US Public Schools.”

2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey

Background

In 2015, the American Federation of Teachers (**AFT**) and the Bass Teachers Association (**BATs**) conducted a survey of teachers and school staff on the quality of their work life in response to concerns regarding work stress that educators had reported to BATs. The 80-question survey was developed by a group of AFT and BATs members, with guidance from a workplace stress expert and professional pollster.

More than 30,000 respondents filled out the 2015 survey, which was distributed via email and social media, with results indicating that major sources of stress for teachers and school staff include uncertain job expectations, negative portrayals of educators in media, and adoption of new initiatives without proper training. Educators also felt pressed for time, including lack of time to use the restroom at work. Mandated curricula and large class sizes were the top issues stressing teachers and staff in the classroom. They also faced bullying, harassment and violence, with 30 percent of respondents reporting having been bullied, and 18 percent reporting having been threatened with violence at school within the past 12 months. The 2015 stress survey garnered national attention, including an article in *The Atlantic* on teachers lacking sufficient time to go to the restroom while at work.

What's New in 2017?

After the overwhelming response to the 2015 survey, the AFT and BATs began to develop a follow-up survey. Based on lessons learned in the first survey, planning for the 2017 survey included efforts to collect data from a more representative sample of educators, to compare results on educator stress with national stress data for other professions, and finally, to compare general survey results with educator stress in districts with strong, collaborative labor-management partnerships. Although 30,000 educators participated in the 2015 survey, the large number of respondents did not comprise a representative sample.

The 2017 survey collected data from four groups: a large convenience sample that any public educator or school staff was able to participate in, again reached publicly via email and social media; a random sample of AFT members who were reached via email and telephone; and two oversample districts in which the survey was emailed to all public school teachers and staff, where local education unions had well-established labor-management collaboration practices in place. With input from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and academic experts in teacher stress and mental health, the 2017 survey instrument was shortened to 29 questions, plus an open-ended final question.

Data collection was conducted over several weeks in May and June 2017. More than 4,000 educators completed the public version of the survey. The random sample of AFT members had 830 respondents.

Overview of Respondents

(AFT member sample, n=830)

JOB TITLES

- Teachers: 84 percent
- Teacher's aide/paraprofessionals: 5.4 percent
- Other professional staff, librarians, and nurses: 8 percent
- Support staff: 1.7 percent

AVERAGE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AS EDUCATORS

- 0-10 years: 33 percent
- 11-20 years: 33 percent
- More than 20 years: 21 percent
- Respondents on average have taught 15 years and have been working at their current schools for nine years.

RESPONDENTS' SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

- Average percentage of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch: 59 percent
- 41 percent urban, 29 percent suburban, 17 percent town or rural
- 67 percent of respondents teach in Title I schools.

DEMOGRAPHICS: RACE, ETHNICITY AND GENDER

Race

- White: 76 percent
- Black or African-American: 13.7 percent
- Asian: 2.5 percent
- Other: 4.8 percent

Hispanic origin

- 12 percent were of Hispanic, Latino, and/or Spanish origin.
- Respondents who said they were Hispanic, Latino or of Spanish origin could be of any race: 34 percent identified their race as "white." 26 percent identified their race as "other" and another 25 percent did not select a race.

Gender

- Male: 22.5 percent
- Female: 77.5 percent

Survey Results

(AFT member sample, n=830)

How Often is Work Stressful?

- In response to the question “How often is work stressful?” nearly a quarter of respondents said “always” (Chart 1)
- Educators and school staff find their work “always” or “often” stressful 61 percent of the time, significantly higher than workers in the general population, who report that work is “always” or “often” stressful only 30 percent of the time.

“As a special education teacher, we have many hours of paper work to accomplish in addition to our teaching and planning. Time for this is not taken into consideration.”

“This job is stressful, overwhelming and hard. I am overworked, underpaid, underappreciated, questioned and blamed for things that are out of my control.”

- More than half of the respondents reported that they have less enthusiasm now than at the beginning of their careers (Chart 2).

Respect

“Our elected officials’ lack of support for educators impacts my level of stress more than what goes on at my local school.”

“Teachers are generally not treated with the respect they deserve. The young people in this country do not want to go into teaching because of the way we are perceived and treated. It is sad.”

- Respondents felt most respected by their co-workers, students and their students’ parents and least respected by elected officials, the media, and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos (Chart 3).

- 60 percent of educators and school staff disagreed that they were treated with respect by the media and by state and federal elected officials.
- Respondents overwhelmingly disagreed that they felt respected by Betsy DeVos.
- Almost 95 percent of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed that they felt respected by colleagues, with nearly 60 percent strongly agreeing.
- However, respect was also lacking at the local level. While a smaller proportion disagreed that they were respected by individuals at the school and community level than by media and individuals at the national level, only 23 percent strongly agreed that they felt respected by their local school boards.
- Less than half of respondents strongly agreed that they felt respected by their supervisors.

Chart 2

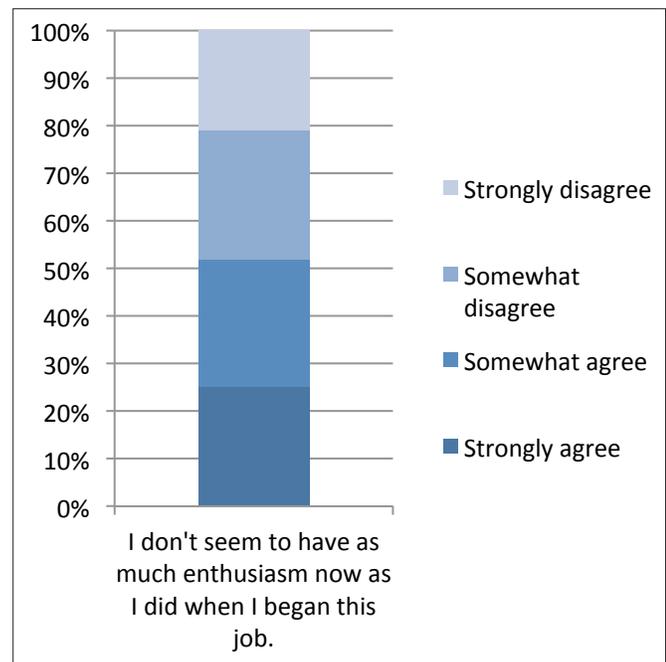


Chart 1

ALWAYS: 23 PERCENT OFTEN: 38 PERCENT SOMETIMES: 30 PERCENT
 HARDLY EVER: 7 PERCENT NEVER: 1 PERCENT

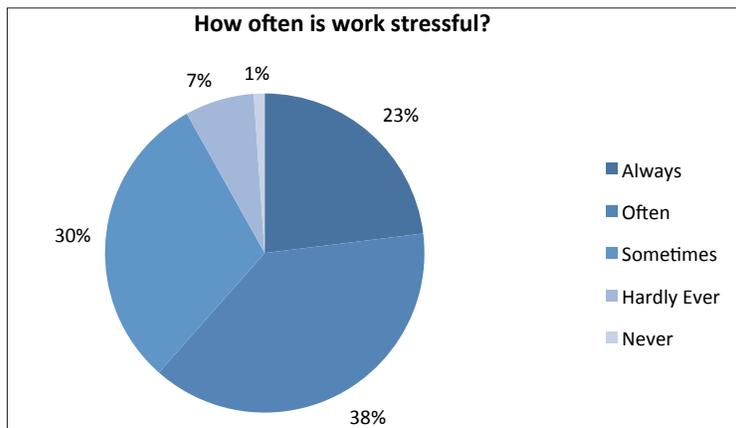
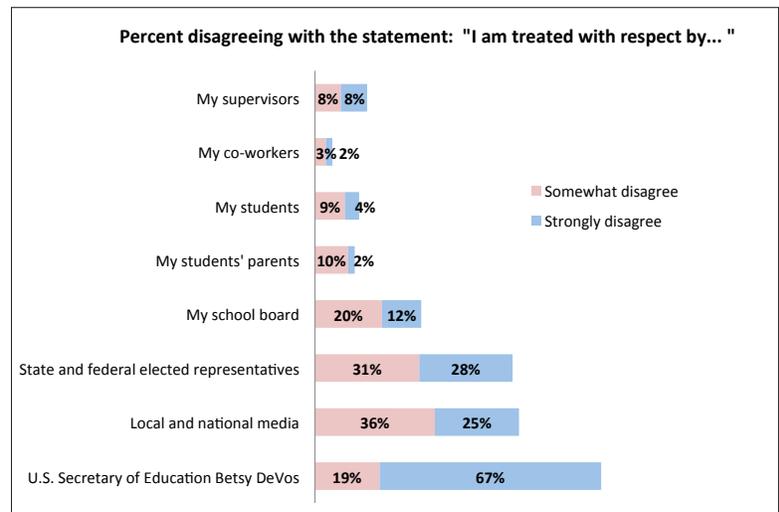


Chart 3



Control and Influence at Work

- Educators report feeling some control over a number of day-to-day classroom-level decisions, but they report having less influence over policy decisions (Charts 4 and 5):
 - Most educators reported “moderate or a great deal of control” over selecting teaching techniques, evaluating and grading students, and determining the amount of homework to be assigned.
 - A majority reported “moderate or a great deal of control” over student discipline in the classroom.
 - 40 percent of respondents reported having “no influence” or only “minor influence” in establishing curriculum at their schools.
 - Nearly half said they had “no influence” or “minor influence” in determining professional development content at their schools.
 - Most reported “minor or no influence” over school budget decisions.

“Majority of stress for teachers comes NOT from students, but from things outside the classroom like district bureaucracy, changing state mandates and the constant flux in testing and other requirements.”

“Biggest stress is all the testing, not the people.”

“We have too many unrealistic expectations put on us now, and there is a constant message that we aren’t important or worth our pay. Plus, we must teach a dictated curriculum that may not match the needs or abilities of our students, which adds stress.”

Chart 4

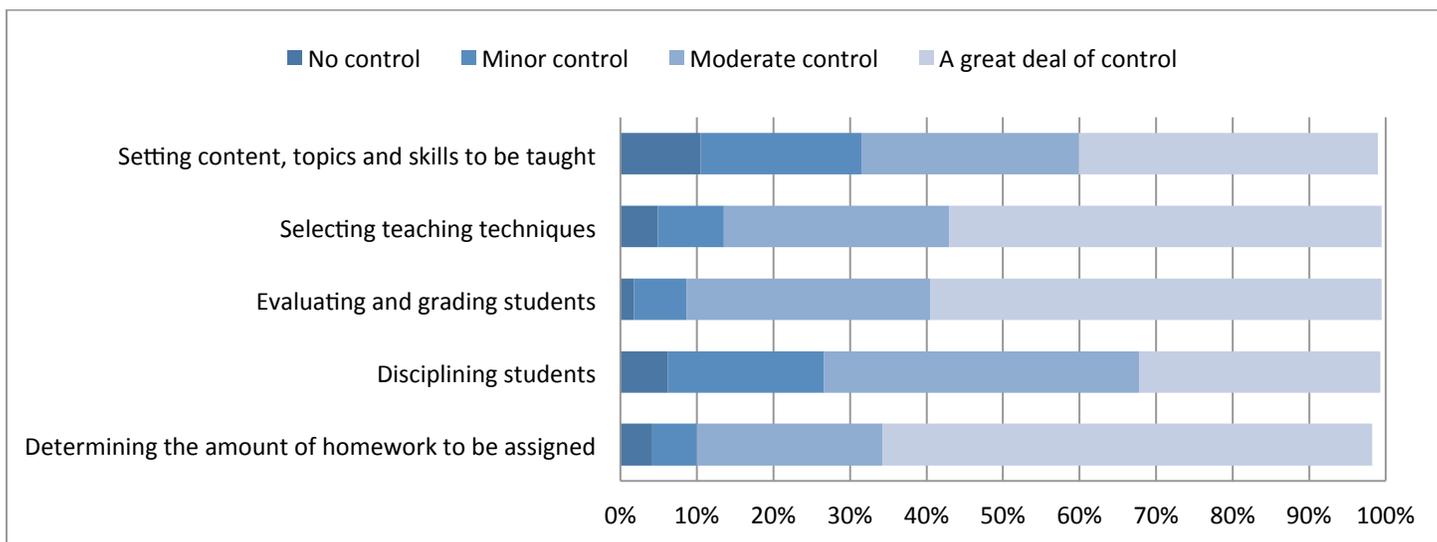
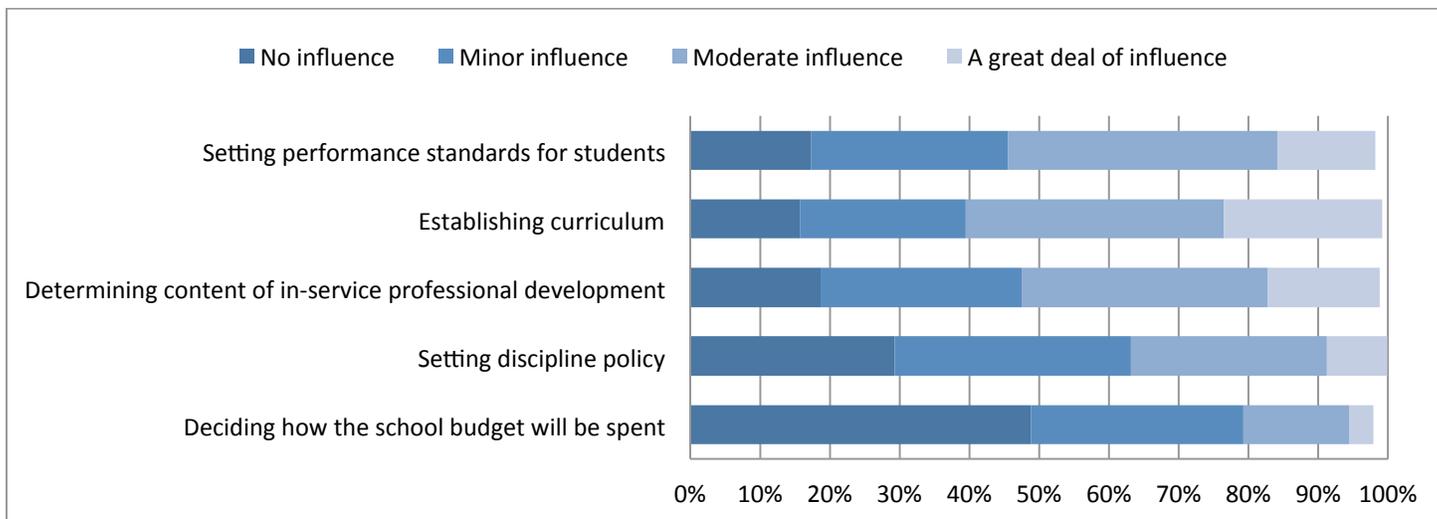


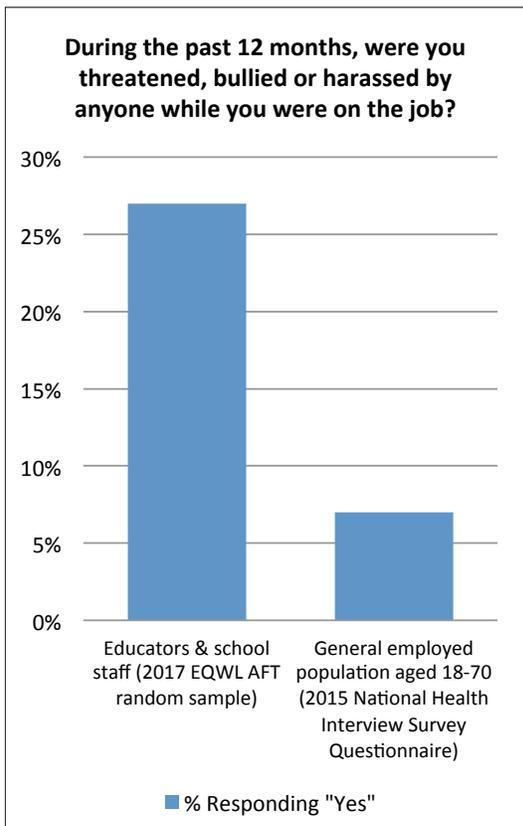
Chart 5



Bullying and Harassment on the Job

- Educators are much more likely to be bullied, harassed and threatened at work than other workers:
 - 26.4 percent of respondents in the random sample reported having been bullied, harassed or threatened at work in the last 12 months. Our public survey respondent group gave some indication that rates of bullying and harassment for educators on the job may be even higher, as 43 percent of respondents in the public survey group reported they had been bullied, harassed or threatened in the last year.
 - Educators and school staff reported being bullied, harassed or threatened at work at a much higher rate than workers in the general population. National data from 2015 show that only 7 percent of employed adults in the U.S. report experiencing bullying, harassment or threats at work.
- A closer look at those who were threatened, bullied or harassed:
 - Who was the bully?
 - 35 percent identified a principal, administrator or supervisor.
 - 23 percent identified a co-worker.
 - 50 percent identified a student.
 - 31 percent identified a student's parent.
- Training on bullying and harassment is lacking in many schools:
 - While most respondents reported that their districts or schools had workplace harassment policies in place that included prohibitions against bullying, fewer noted that their schools provided regular training on harassment and bullying (just over half of the random sample and roughly a third of the public survey respondents).

Chart 6



Health and Well-Being

- "There isn't much support for teachers suffering from mental health issues. We're worried that it will be a reason to be given negative evaluations or fired."*
- "Working with kids with high incidences of trauma leads to secondary trauma, which we just started to get some training on last year."*
- Teachers and school staff are significantly more stressed than other U.S. workers (Chart 7):
 - Respondents in the random sample reported an average of seven days in the last 30 that their mental health was not good. Respondents to the public survey reported an even higher average of 12 days in the last 30 that their mental health was not good. The 2017 public sample also showed a dramatic increase in the number of educators reporting that they had seven or more days in the past 30 that their mental health was not good—from 34 percent in 2015 to 58 percent in 2017.
 - 21 percent of educators in the random sample characterized their mental health as not good for 11 or more days in the last 30, significantly higher than U.S. workers generally, less than 10 percent of whom reported poor mental health for 11 or more days in the past month, according to national data from 2014. Even after taking age and gender into account, women aged 18-64 and men aged 35-44 in the random sample reported significantly more days of poor mental health than U.S. workers of the same gender and age group.
 - The majority of U.S. working adults reported zero days in the last 30 that their mental health was not good, while the majority of educators and school staff reported that their mental health was not good for at least one to three days of the last month.

Chart 7

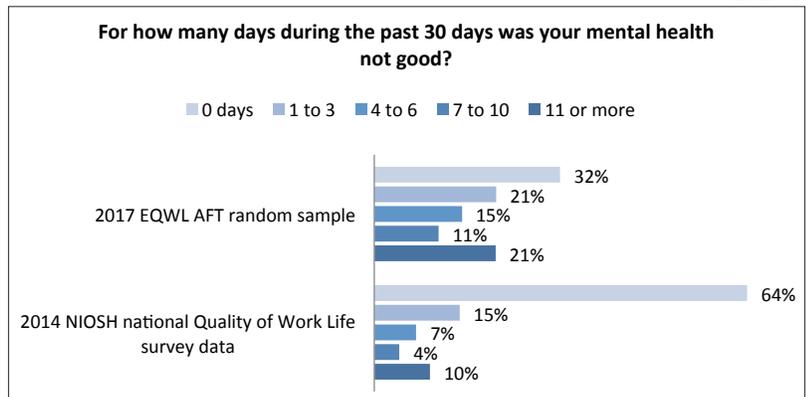
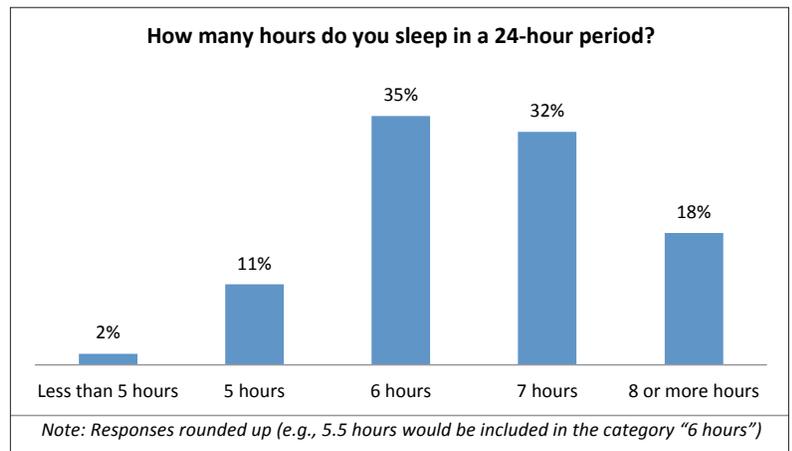


Chart 8



"I find it very difficult to maintain a balance with home life, physical activity and work. I can tell it is taking its toll on me physically."

"For the past eight years, my blood pressure is consistently 20 points higher during the school year than in the summer."

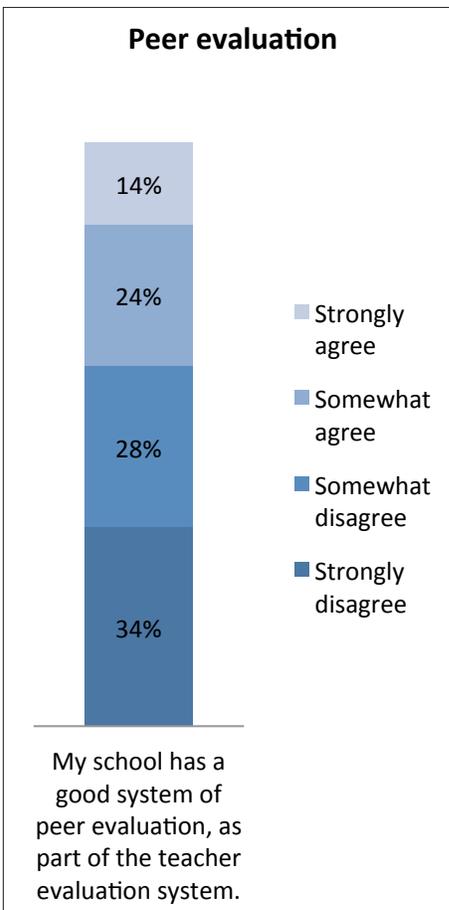
• Educators' physical health is more likely to suffer than other U.S. workers:

- 18 percent of respondents characterized their health as "fair" or "poor," higher than employed people nationally, 12.4 percent of whom reported their health as "fair" or "poor" on the 2014 NIOSH Quality of Work Life survey. Even after taking into account gender and age, a significantly higher proportion of female educators and school staff ages 45 to 54 and male educators and school staff ages 35 to 44 reported "fair" or "poor" health than all U.S. workers.
- Educators and school staff were more likely to have ever been told by a health professional that they had hypertension or blood sugar conditions, such as prediabetes or impaired glucose tolerance, than workers nationally. In addition, male educators and school staff ages 18 to 44 were more likely to have been told by a health professional that they had hypertension compared with men of the same age nationally.

• Teacher and school staff sleep (Chart 8):

- Respondents slept an average of 6.6 hours per night.
- 48 percent of respondents slept six or fewer hours per night, which may contribute to worse health outcomes.
- Respondents teaching in schools with schoolwide Title I designation were more likely to sleep six or fewer hours per night than their peers in non-Title I schools (51 percent vs. 38 percent, respectively).

Chart 9



"I often lose sleep over the welfare of my special education students. As I lose sleep, I become run down and more easily affected by illness."

"The amount of stress related to work is overwhelming. Sometimes I can't sleep. Sometimes I just feel depressed or anxious about my students' performance."

Other Stressors Facing Teachers and School Staff

- Respondents averaged more than 50 hours of work per week.
- Educators and school staff reported working more than their regularly scheduled hours 13 or 14 days per month—over two-thirds of the total working days in a month.
- A majority of educators said that when they need additional resources to do their jobs, they usually get them, but close to one-third did not.
- One-third of respondents disagreed that teachers and faculty at their schools felt safe bringing up problems and addressing issues.
- 62 percent of educators somewhat or strongly disagreed that their schools have good systems of peer evaluation in place as part of the teacher evaluation system (Chart 9).
- In response to the public Educator Quality of Work Life Survey's open-ended question, educators and school staff identified additional stressors, including:

- Sick buildings;
- Rising healthcare costs and stagnating wages;
- Teacher shortages that affect school-level staffing;
- Lack of sufficient, trained professional staff to help students experiencing trauma and mental health concerns; and
- Lack of time to collaborate with colleagues.

"There is no time to collaborate with co-workers. There is barely any time to even go to the bathroom. That in itself is a stressor. Also, with all the extra paperwork needed for special education students, there is minimal time to teach."

"Buildings are in poor condition. Leaks are prevalent, and no one knows if mold is growing. Classrooms are so hot at times. If a classroom does have air-conditioning, it makes so much noise that it's hard to teach."

"What my school really needs is more social and emotional support for students (more counselors, social workers, etc.). We have students who have experienced trauma, and we struggle with behavior because of it; it causes a lot of stress for everyone."

"My health suffers because I cannot afford the treatment that my physician would like. The cost of healthcare, for me and my wife, is too high. It causes a great deal of financial stress."

Labor-Management Collaboration Districts: Solvay and North Syracuse

The 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey included oversample data collection in two New York school districts, Solvay Union Free School District and North Syracuse Central School District, where local unions and districts have forged strong, collaborative labor-management relationships. Both districts have also participated in the AFT’s Center for School Improvement for many years. Responses to several of the survey questions in these districts differed significantly from the public survey responses and the AFT member random sample.

- Although the majority of educators in each survey group found work “often” or “always” stressful, a significantly smaller percentage of respondents in the labor-management districts characterized work as “always” stressful compared to the public survey respondents. Although the finding was not statistically significant, respondents in Solvay and North Syracuse were also less likely to find work “always” stressful than those in the random sample (**Chart 10**).
- Respondents in the two labor-management districts were also more likely to agree that their schools have good teacher mentoring programs. This finding was especially strong in Solvay (**Chart 11**).
- Respondents in the labor-management districts were significantly more likely to agree that they felt respected by their supervisors compared with the public sample. Some 67.5 percent of educators and school staff in Solvay and 54.8 percent in North Syracuse strongly agreed that their supervisors treated them with respect vs. 35.2 percent of the public survey respondents. Although the difference between the random sample and the labor-management groups was not statistically significant, only 48.3 percent of the random sample respondents strongly agreed they were treated with respect by their supervisors.
- Of educators and school staff who said they were threatened, bullied or harassed in the past year, respondents in Solvay and North Syracuse were significantly less likely to say the person who bullied them was a principal, administrator or supervisor.
- Respondents in Solvay and North Syracuse slept an average of 10-12 minutes more per night than respondents in the random sample, closer to the recommended seven to eight hours per night, and worked two to three fewer hours per week than those in the random sample.
- Respondents in Solvay and North Syracuse were more likely to say that it is not hard at all to take time off from work to take care of family or personal matters compared with those in the public sample.
- A smaller percentage of educators in Solvay and North Syracuse said they were “very likely” to leave the profession in the next year compared with the public sample.
- Fewer educators in the youngest age group (ages 18-34) in Solvay and North Syracuse than in the random sample said they were “very likely” to leave the profession in the next year. In North Syracuse, educators ages 35-44 said they were “very likely” to leave the field of education in the next year at a much smaller rate than any of the other samples.

Chart 10

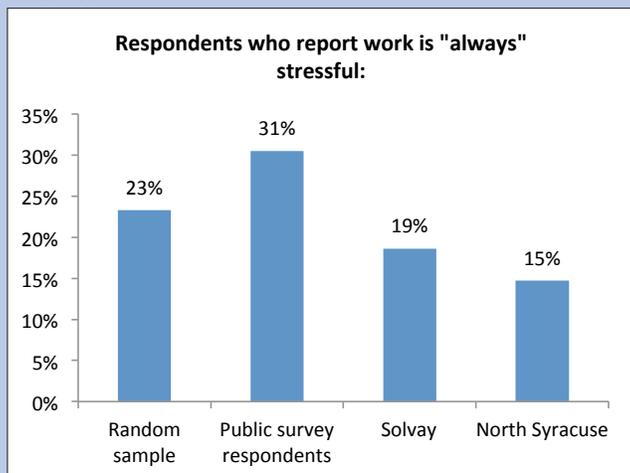
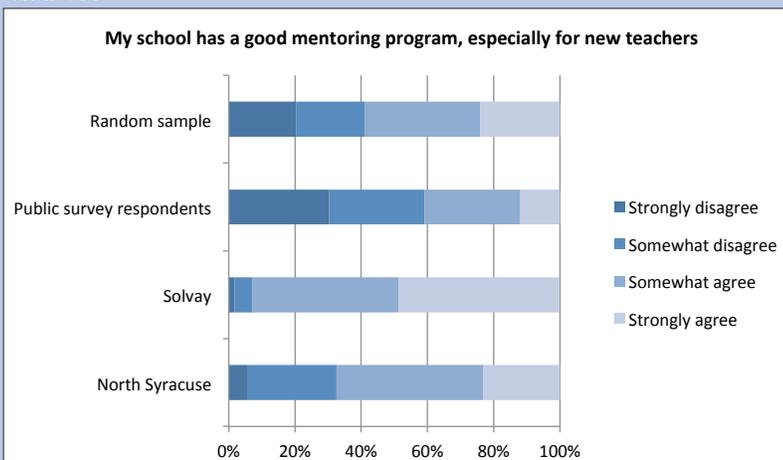


Chart 11



What the Future Holds

- Responses indicated teachers' and school staff's belief in their local school communities. Although they face many stressors in the profession, educators largely agreed that their individual schools focus on what is best for student learning when making important decisions; that there is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members; and that they feel respected by co-workers, students and parents.
- In spite of the many challenges facing them, only 7 percent of respondents reported that they were "very likely" to seek employment outside of education within the next year. The vast majority said they were not at all likely to do so.
- 64 percent of educators and school staff disagreed with the statement "the stress and disappointments involved in working at this school are not really worth it."
- Nearly 95 percent of educators and school staff in all respondent groups agreed that teachers and faculty need strong unions to protect their interests.
- Educators who agreed they felt safe bringing up problems and addressing issues at work also planned to remain in the field of education at higher rates.
- Respondents in the random sample who strongly agreed that their schools had good peer mentoring programs, or who strongly agreed that they felt respected by their supervisors:
 - Were less likely to say that work is "always" stressful;
 - Were more likely to feel safe bringing up problems and addressing issues at their schools;
 - Were less likely to agree that they felt less enthusiasm for their profession now than when they began;
 - Only 17 percent of respondents who strongly agreed their schools had good mentoring programs and 21 percent of those who strongly agreed they were respected by their supervisors reported their mental health being bad for seven or more days in the past 30 versus 32 percent of all random sample respondents.
 - Respondents who strongly agreed that their schools had good peer mentoring programs were also much more likely to strongly agree that they felt respected by their supervisors.
- Partnerships are a vehicle for system improvement (from Saul Rubinstein "Strengthening Partnerships"):¹

What Do These Differences Mean for Educators and School Staff?

- Educators' survey responses and open-ended comments both indicate that major stressors for teachers and school staff are largely systemic and not the result of an individual's inability to cope.
- In the random sample, educators who strongly agreed their schools had good teacher mentor programs were also less likely to say they would leave the profession within the next year. This finding was particularly strong among early and mid-career educators. Educators ages 18-34 and 35-44 who strongly agreed they had good mentoring programs were less likely to say they planned to leave education than those who strongly disagreed (for instance, 14 percent of teachers in the 18-34 age group and 12 percent of those in the 35-44 age group who strongly disagreed that they had good mentoring programs said they were "very likely" to leave education in the next year, versus just 2 percent of those ages 18-34 and none of those ages 35-44 who strongly agreed they had good mentoring programs at their schools). Similar trends were also reflected among the public survey responses.
- Partnerships create a culture of inclusion and involvement, respect for teachers, collaborative planning, problem-solving and decision-making at the school level, and mentoring programs that involve teacher leaders.
- Partnerships create opportunities for joint learning and building the professional capacity of administrators and teachers.
- Educators who strongly agreed they felt respected by their supervisors planned to remain in the field of education at higher rates.

Why Does Educator Stress Matter?

“All of the policies coming out of the government make this profession stressful. No wonder young people don’t want to enter the field: They aren’t respected. The pay is low, especially considering the number of hours spent in and out of the classroom. The ones who ultimately pay for this are the children.”

- **Research shows that teacher stress affects student outcomes:**

- A 2016 report on teacher stress and health by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Penn State University notes that teacher stress is linked to high turnover, which in turn can result in lower achievement for students and higher costs for school districts.²
- The RWJ report also cites data showing that “higher teacher engagement in their jobs predicted higher student engagement, which in turn predicted higher student achievement outcomes.”³
- A 2015 study shows that teacher stress and depression symptoms are linked to lower student achievement gains in third-grade math.⁴

Endnotes

1 Saul Rubinstein. “Strengthening Partnerships.” *American Educator*. Winter 2013-2014.

2 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Penn State University. (2016). “Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools.”

3 Gordon, G. (2010). “The Other Outcome: Student Hope, Engagement, Wellbeing.”

4 McLean, L. and Connor, C. (2015). “Depressive Symptoms in Third-Grade Teachers: Relations to Classroom Quality and Student Achievement.”

5 The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. (2010). “Organizing Schools for Improvement.”

6 Saul Rubinstein. “Strengthening Partnerships.” *American Educator*. Winter 2013-2014.

Labor-Management Collaboration and the AFT Center for School Improvement



Research has shown that strong collaborative relationships between administrators and teachers can be a vehicle for systemwide improvement, enabling schools to thrive. A rigorous study of more than 400 Chicago elementary schools found that the most effective schools had developed an unusually high degree of “relational trust” among stakeholders.⁵

For nearly 20 years, the AFT’s Center for School Improvement (CSI) has led the way in creating a forum for the union and administrators to work together in innovative ways to improve teaching quality and student performance. Case studies of a number of participating districts reveal that partnerships create a culture of inclusion and involvement; respect for teachers; collaborative planning, problem-solving and decision-making at the school level; mentoring programs that involve teacher leaders; opportunities for joint learning and building the professional capacity of administrators and teachers.⁶

Both Solvay and North Syracuse have participated in the CSI Leadership Institute, a four-day national institute that district and school improvement teams can attend

to build collaborative skills aimed at improving student achievement, for many years, so it is not surprising that survey respondents from these two districts felt more respected and were more likely to say they had a good peer mentoring program in their school than did respondents to the general survey.

Collaboration does not eliminate all of a district’s problems, but it does enable everyone connected to a school to develop processes that lead to joint solutions to problems, creating a sense of shared responsibility and agency. The CSI facilitates building this kind of relationship by providing technical assistance and professional development around the skills and structures that make for effective communication, team building, data analysis for planning, professional development to support student achievement, and action planning. It is precisely this type of purposeful and solution-driven approach to promoting a positive school climate that helps educators improve student success, while minimizing the inevitable stresses associated with the profession and their negative impact on the well-being of educators themselves.



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