



**Cultivate Learning Environments to
Accelerate Recruitment and Retention**

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**An Interim Report on the Mississippi Project
CLEAR Voice Survey**

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For virtually any business or organization, employees' working conditions drive their satisfaction and productivity. Schools are no different. Research demonstrates the importance of addressing school conditions to improve 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 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Teachers also 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 (Loeb & Darling-Hammond, 2005). In recent working conditions surveys of teachers in North Carolina, Kansas, and Arizona, the Center for Teaching Quality has found strong connections between several teaching and learning factors — including the time that teachers have to plan, the extent to which they feel empowered, and the quality of their school leaders — and student achievement and teacher retention (Hirsch & Emerick, 2006, 2006, 2007).

In the Spring of 2007, under the leadership of State Superintendent of Schools Hank Bounds and the Mississippi Teacher Center, the Center for Teaching Quality conducted a web-based population study of all Mississippi teachers — asking them to respond to a range of questions about time, professional development, leadership, empowerment, and facilities and resources. The purpose was clear: to Cultivate Learning Environments to Accelerate Recruitment and Retention (CLEAR). As Superintendent Bounds notes in his message on the Project Clear Voice homepage, “We must know and understand the needs of our teachers so that we can provide them with the tools and resources they need to help our students succeed.”

By hearing directly from school-based educators who intimately experience and understand working condition issues, policymakers will have the opportunity to make data driven decisions for developing policies that make Mississippi schools better places to work and learn. For example, while 85 percent of the state's educators intend to stay in teaching and in their current school (referred to as “stayers” throughout this report), policymakers can look at the perceptions of teachers who plan to leave their schools (“movers”) and the profession altogether (“leavers”) to gain insights on how to recruit and retain teachers for its public schools.

Due to the tireless efforts of the Mississippi Teacher Center, more than 25,000 educators (67 percent) from across the state participated in Project CLEAR Voice. Data — only released if at least 40 percent of the school faculty or district's school-based licensed educators responded — is now available for 877 schools (85 percent) and 136 school districts (88 percent), providing critical information for making local and state level decisions. A final report, analyzing the findings of the survey relative to student learning and teacher retention outcomes, will also be submitted in the fall. In the meantime, some general trends can surfaced.

Finding 1: Mississippi Teachers Believe Their Schools are Good Places to Work and Learn

Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of Mississippi educators agree that their school is a good place to work and learn. One-third of educators “strongly” agree with that statement. Teachers were positive about teaching and learning conditions in several areas. Consider the following:

- ***Mississippi educators are generally positive about their facilities and resources.*** At least two-thirds of Mississippi educators note they have sufficient instructional materials (73 percent), instructional technology (72 percent), communications technology such as email and phones, (72 percent) and office equipment (66 percent). Additionally 69 percent agree that they have adequate professional space, and a very large proportion (79 percent) agree that their school environment is safe.
- ***Educators are positive about the commitment of the faculty in their school.*** Eighty-four percent of educators believe the faculty is committed to helping every student learn. Two-thirds (66 percent) believe that steps are made in their school to solve problems.
- ***The least and most experienced teachers are more likely to agree that their schools’ teaching and learning conditions are positive.*** On most questions, teachers in their first year and those with 20 or more years of experience are slightly more positive than their colleagues about time, empowerment, leadership, and professional development issues. Teachers in the first three years of their careers, however, were less likely to believe that their schools had sufficient instructional, communication, and office resources. Generally, teachers with seven to ten years of experience are slightly less likely to agree that they have sufficient time, involvement in decision-making, and supportive school leadership.
- ***Elementary educators are more likely to note the presence of important teaching and learning conditions in their school than middle and high school teachers.*** Elementary school educators are significantly more satisfied with the quality of professional development, processes and capacity for collaborative decision-making, opportunities for the community to contribute to school success, and strong school leadership.

Table 1
Percentage of Educators Agreeing Teaching and Learning Conditions
Are Present by School Level

CLEAR Voice Question	Elem	Middle	High	Difference Between Elem & High Agreement
Professional development activities enhance teachers' skills as instructional leaders.	66%	60%	50%	16%
Opportunities are available for members of the community to contribute actively to this school's success.	77%	66%	62%	15%
Professional development provides teachers with the knowledge and skills most needed to teach effectively.	68%	61%	54%	14%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems.	55%	48%	42%	13%
Teachers have multiple opportunities to learn from one another	62%	58%	49%	13%
The school leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct.	64%	53%	51%	13%

- Educators in Mississippi are as likely to note the presence of important teaching and learning conditions as their peers in several other states where CTQ has conducted similar working conditions surveys.*** Mississippi educators generally report more positive teaching and learning environments than their Arizona teaching peers and perceive conditions similar to Kansas and North Carolina educators. (In the final report, we will offer more fine-grained statistical analyses to determine if the differences in response rates are statistically significant.)

Table 2
Percentage of Educators Agreeing Teaching and Learning Conditions Are Present in Statewide Surveys

CLEAR Voice Question	MS (2007)	KS (2006)	NC (2006)	AZ (2007)
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	60%	62%	64%	57%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction	64%	61%	72%	59%
The school leadership communicates clear expectations to students and parents	69%	63%	72%	61%
The faculty are committed to helping every student learn	84%	87%	85%	70%
Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective	61%	59%	64%	58%
Teachers have sufficient access to instructional technology	72%	64%	74%	59%
Teachers are centrally involved in educational decision-making	40%	44%	53%	36%

Source: All results from statewide teaching and learning conditions survey initiatives in 2006 and 2007. North Carolina and Kansas Working Conditions Surveys 2006, Mississippi and Arizona Working Conditions Surveys 2007. See www.teachingquality.org for more information.

Finding 2: School Leadership is Critical to Retaining Teachers

On average, it costs a minimum of \$12,000 to replace a teacher who leaves a classroom. In addition to the monetary costs of attrition, new data from the New Teacher Center reveal that well designed novice teacher induction programs can dramatically increase student achievement (Fletcher, Strong, & Villar, 2003). With so much at stake in keeping experienced educators in the classroom, policymakers would be well served to consider the factors that lead to strong retention rates. The Mississippi survey data indicate that school leadership is foremost among these critical elements.

As noted, most Mississippi teachers are satisfied with their current workplace. ***These positive feelings are evident as approximately 85 percent of Mississippi teachers say their goal is to stay at their current school.*** Nine percent note

that they want to move to a new school but stay in teaching, and six percent indicate that they plan to leave the teaching profession entirely.

Not surprisingly, survey results indicate that ***teachers with positive perceptions about their teaching and learning conditions are much more likely to want to remain teaching in their current school*** (Table 3). Leavers are more positive than movers, most likely because those who are leaving teaching do so not just due to dissatisfaction, but other non-teaching related causes. For instance, recent data from the Schools and Staffing Survey indicate that of the teachers who leave 15 percent do so because of dissatisfaction with teaching as a career and another 25 percent leave in pursuit of a non-teaching career (Marvel, Lyter, Peltola, Strizek, & Morton, 2006). According to the Mississippi survey data, stayers and movers expressed the greatest disagreement over measures of leadership and empowerment.

- ***Teachers who intend to remain in their current teaching position, compared to those who intend to move schools, are more than three times more likely to agree that the school leadership is effective and that an atmosphere of trust is present.*** Stayers are also more positive about how school leadership supports and respects teachers and clearly communicates expectations.
- ***Movers and leavers see their school's ability to effectively and collaboratively address problems as critical for their career plans.*** Less than one-quarter of movers believe their current school takes steps to solve problems and less than one-fifth agree that there is an effective process for making group decisions (compared to more than two-thirds and half of stayers respectively).

**Table 3
Differences in the Perceptions of Stayers and Movers
on Teacher Working Conditions Questions**

CLEAR Voice Question	Percent of Teachers Agreeing			Difference Between Stayers and Movers
	Stayers	Movers	Leavers	
Overall, my school leadership is effective	65%	19%	41%	46%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	64%	18%	38%	46%
In this school we take steps to solve problems	69%	25%	43%	44%

The leadership consistently supports teachers when needed	69%	25%	46%	44%
Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them	59%	18%	35%	41%
The school leadership communicates clear expectations to students and parents	72%	31%	51%	41%
Teachers are respected as professionals	63%	23%	30%	40%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems	53%	17%	28%	36%

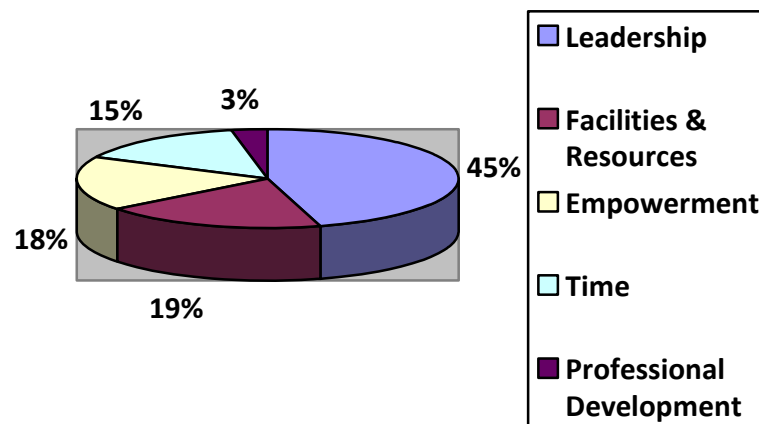
The disparities between stayers and movers are not just reflective of whether working conditions are present, but also whether school leadership makes efforts to improve them. ***Teachers who want to stay in their school are far more likely to believe leadership is working to improve teaching and learning conditions than those who want to move schools.*** While more than half of stayers believe that leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about empowerment (58 percent) and leadership issues (53 percent), less than one-fifth of movers agree with the same statements (18 percent and 17 percent respectively). Over two-thirds of those who want to stay in their teaching job believe leadership supports concerns about classroom management compared to only about one-quarter (27 percent) of movers.

**Table 4
Difference in Perception between Stayers and Movers about
School Leadership Efforts to Address Working Conditions**

School leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about:	Percent of Teachers Agreeing			Difference Between Stayers and Movers
	Stayers	Movers	Leavers	
Classroom management of today's students	67%	27%	40%	40%
Empowering teachers	58%	18%	32%	40%
The use of time in the school	64%	26%	39%	38%
Facilities and resources	67%	30%	41%	37%
Leadership issues	53%	17%	30%	36%
Professional development	65%	30%	45%	35%

When asked to select which of the surveyed teaching and learning conditions most influenced retention decisions, leadership was by far the most common response (46 percent). About one-fifth of teachers also indicated empowerment (18 percent) and facilities and resources (19 percent) as important, but only three percent of Mississippi educators identified professional development as the most critical working condition influencing retention decisions

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



Leadership continued to play a central role in teachers’ thinking about the factors, including both working conditions and other elements, most likely to influence future employment plans (Table 5). Two-thirds of teachers report that support from school leadership is an extremely important influence. More than half indicate that students, both in terms of their learning (59 percent) and behavior (52 percent), are critical. ***Salary, while important, was less likely to be a significant influence than the teaching assignment, atmosphere within the school, and ability to make impactful decisions.***

Table 5
Factors Influencing Future Employment Plans in Mississippi

Factors Influencing Teachers' Decisions about Their Future Intentions for Their Professional Career	Percent Agreeing It is Extremely Important
Adequate support from school leadership	67%
Effectiveness with the students I teach	59%
Student behavior	52%
Personal reasons (health, family, etc.)	51%
Teaching assignment (subject, students)	47%
Collegial atmosphere amongst the staff	44%
Empowerment to make decisions that affect my school and/or classroom	43%
Salary	41%
Adequate facilities and/or resources	40%
Retirement options	40%

Finding 3: Teachers and Administrators View Working Conditions Differently.

While some differences in the perceptions of working conditions could be expected between “bosses” and “employees” in any industry, the disparity between principals and teachers is extremely large in Mississippi. ***On all questions, the 574 principals responding to the survey were significantly more likely than the approximately 23,000 teachers to note that positive working conditions are in place, and that leadership was making efforts to improve them*** (Table 6).

Similar gaps in perception exist between teachers and other school-based licensed educators, but these differences are significantly smaller than the difference between teachers and principals. The gaps in perception between teachers and principals appear to be greatest in the areas of leadership and empowerment, two of the working conditions educators said were most important to them in deciding their future employment plans (Figure 1).

Principals were far more likely to believe that teachers are a part of an effective process for making collaborative decisions. The question with the greatest gap in perception between teachers and principals involved teacher participation in decision-making. While only about one-third (37 percent) of teachers believe they are centrally involved in decision-making on educational issues, nine out of ten principals believe this is true in their school. Further, principals were almost twice as likely as teachers to agree that there is an effective process for making decisions and solving problems. Gaps were also evident in leadership areas including creating trusting environments, consistently enforcing student conduct rules, and protecting teachers from non-essential duties.

**Table 6
Teachers’ and Principals’ Perceptions of Teaching and Learning Conditions**

CLEAR Voice Survey Question	Percent Agreeing		Difference Between Teachers and Principals
	Teachers	Principals	
Teachers are centrally involved in decision-making about educational issues	37%	89%	52%
The school leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct	56%	98%	42%
Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them	54%	95%	41%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems	48%	88%	40%
Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students	49%	86%	37%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school.	59%	94%	35%

Given how critical these issues are to teacher retention, schools and districts should take note of these findings. It is not necessarily that principals do not want to address these issues, but that they do not perceive they are issues to the same extent as teachers.

Principals are not only far 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 7). A “perfect storm” of factors coming together is evident in the data.

- First, as noted previously, educators indicate that leadership and empowerment factors (as well as facilities and resources) are the most critical influences on future employment plans.
- Second, teachers believe that school leadership efforts to address working conditions are least likely to occur in the areas of leadership (49 percent) and empowerment (53 percent).
- Third, the gap between teacher and principal perception is largest in whether efforts are made to improve conditions is in the areas of leadership and empowerment. Principals are about twice as likely as teachers to believe that sustained efforts are being made to address concerns in both areas.

Using the data to ensure all faculty have similar perceptions about the conditions of work—both positive and negative conditions—is essential in order to move forward with school improvement planning. The data here indicate a need to prioritize leadership and empowerment in that planning.

**Table 7
Teachers’ and Principals’ Perception of School Leadership Efforts to Address Working Conditions**

School leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about:	Percent Agreeing		Difference Between Teachers and Principals
	Teachers	Principals	
Leadership issues	49%	92%	43%
Empowering teachers	53%	96%	43%
The use of time in my school	59%	96%	37%
Classroom management of today’s students	62%	98%	36%
Facilities and resources	62%	96%	34%
Professional development	61%	93%	32%

These wide disparities between the perceptions of principals and teachers documented in Mississippi have also been found in other studies in North Carolina, Arizona, Kansas, Nevada and Ohio. It is an important finding—a finding that calls for school-based, data-driven working conditions conversations and 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 4: Mississippi Educators Appear More Involved in Classroom-level Decisions, but Not In School-level Ones.

Research has demonstrated the importance of teacher empowerment on teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2003). Teachers want to play a role in classroom and school decisions to ensure they can be effective with their students. It appears educators in Mississippi are not playing a significant role in many decisions that ultimately impact their school.

A significant percentage of Mississippi teachers report playing a large role in decisions about classroom issues such as selecting instructional issues (46 percent), setting grading and student assessment practices (48 percent), and devising teaching techniques (61 percent) (Table 8). However, teachers are far less likely to report that they or their colleagues play a large role in school-level decisions such as hiring (5 percent), budgeting (5 percent), setting student discipline policies (20 percent) determining the content of professional development (17 percent), and school improvement planning (17 percent).

More than one-quarter (26 percent) of teachers report playing no role in selecting the professional development opportunities available to them, and more than half (56 percent) say they play no more than a small role. Additionally teachers are not engaged in school improvement planning (57 percent play no more than a small role) or determining how Education Enhancement Funds will be spent (more than one-third play no role at all).

**Table 8
Teachers’ Role in School Decision-Making**

Please indicate how large a role teachers have at your school in each of the following areas:	Role Indicated Mississippi Teachers Play in Decision-Making in Their School				
	No role at all	Small role	Moderate role	Large role	Primary role
Selecting instructional materials and resources	6%	17%	30%	33%	13%
Devising teaching techniques	4%	11%	24%	40%	21%
Setting grading and student assessment practices	9%	16%	26%	35%	13%

Determining the content of in-service professional development	26%	30%	28%	15%	2%
The selection of teachers new to this school	66%	19%	10%	4%	1%
Establishing and implementing policies for student discipline	28%	28%	24%	17%	3%
Deciding how the school budget will be spent	65%	21%	10%	4%	1%
School improvement planning	29%	28%	25%	15%	2%
Education Enhancement Funds	39%	19%	18%	14%	10%

Not surprisingly, this lack of participation has lead educators to feel separated from decision-making. Only 40 percent of educators agree that they are centrally involved in decision-making about educational issues. Part of the issue could be the process for making school-wide decisions. Only half of educators agree that there is an effective process for making decisions and solving problems in their school.

Despite these empowerment issues, a majority of Mississippi educators agree that they are respected as professionals (59 percent) and trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction (64 percent).

Finding 5: Teachers in High Poverty Schools are Less Likely to Report that Key Working Conditions are in Place in Their School.

While significant variation in perceptions cannot be attributed to individual teacher background or demographics, there are consistent differences between schools. Not all schools have the types of teaching and learning environments necessary to keep teachers and ensure student success. Unfortunately, some of the disparities in the presence of working conditions can be explained by the students served in those schools. ***Schools serving a lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students consistently had more positive teaching and learning conditions*** (Table 9).

- ***High poverty schools are consistently less likely to have important teaching and learning conditions present.*** High poverty schools are less likely to be safe, have trusting environments, and provide sufficient instructional materials and resources. For example, two-thirds of educators in more affluent schools agree that there is an atmosphere of trust compared to less than half (45 percent) in the highest poverty schools.

- **Teaching and learning conditions gaps are greatest in the areas of facilities and resources and school leadership.** Across all school levels, the greatest disparities in reported teaching and learning conditions between high and low poverty schools are in the area of resources and leadership. Little difference was reported on professional development issues such as access, resources and quality.
- **The poverty gap is greatest at the secondary level.** Educators in the highest and lowest poverty schools at the elementary school level note similar agreement about whether many working conditions are in place. The areas where the greatest disparities exist across elementary schools —atmosphere of trust, safety, and availability of resources— are the same areas as middle and high school, but the differences are smaller. Gaps based on poverty levels are widest in high schools.

**Table 9
Percent of Teachers Agreeing with Working Conditions Questions
By Quartile of Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students**

Domain/Question (percent that agree/strongly agree)	Lowest Quartile	2 nd Quartile	3 rd Quartile	Highest Quartile	Difference Between Lowest and Highest Poverty Schools
Elementary School					
Percentage of Students Receiving Free Lunch	>54%	54-78%	7-91%	91-100%	
Time Domain	3.09	2.97	2.95	3.04	0.05
Facilities and Resources	3.73	3.66	3.53	3.59	0.14
Empowerment	2.67	2.56	2.54	2.63	0.04
Leadership	3.73	3.57	3.54	3.59	0.14
Professional Development	3.50	3.38	3.43	3.50	0.00
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	69%	62%	57%	57%	13%
Teachers and staff work in a school environment that is safe	89%	83%	76%	77%	12%

Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction	68%	62%	58%	59%	9%
The faculty is committed to helping every student learn	92%	87%	84%	87%	8%
Teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials and resources	80%	75%	71%	73%	7%
Middle School					
Percentage of Students Receiving Free Lunch	0-47.7%	47.8-71.5%	71.6-87.1%	87.2-100%	
Time Domain	3.21	3.10	2.90	3.08	0.13
Facilities and Resources	3.70	3.66	3.37	3.45	0.26
Empowerment	2.63	2.55	2.43	2.55	0.08
Leadership	3.59	3.48	3.24	3.38	0.21
Professional Development	3.32	3.35	3.24	3.29	0.03
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect	67%	58%	44%	45%	22%
Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective	69%	59%	46%	49%	19%
Teachers and staff work in a school environment that is safe	85%	76%	59%	65%	19%
Teachers have access to appropriate instructional materials and resources	79%	72%	64%	61%	18%
Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students minimal interruption	66%	56%	43%	49%	17%

High School					
Percentage of Students Receiving Free Lunch	0-43.8%	43.9-61.2%	61.3-80.0%	80.1-100%	
Time Domain	3.16	3.11	3.00	2.93	0.23
Facilities and Resources	3.65	3.62	3.48	3.23	0.42
Empowerment	2.67	2.53	2.55	2.45	0.22
Leadership	3.53	3.40	3.34	3.22	0.31
Professional Development	3.18	3.19	3.25	3.10	0.08
Teachers and staff work in a school environment that is safe	82%	79%	67%	60%	22%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school	64%	57%	52%	43%	22%
Teachers have sufficient access to office equipment and supplies such as copy machines, paper, pens, etc.	71%	67%	67%	51%	20%
Teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials and resources	72%	68%	63%	52%	20%
Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective	64%	58%	53%	47%	17%

Note: Working conditions domain averages are a composite of questions that statistically were found to cohere together in explaining the listed working condition concept. All questions are on a one to five scale with one being the lowest and five being the highest possible composite.

Conclusions

Initial survey data suggest that Mississippi 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 Mississippi learn. For our final report, we will continue to investigate some of the following significant issues:

- 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.
- Through examination of response data, we can further explore the contours of the state's teaching and learning conditions as related to the economic status of students, with the goal of helping policymakers to close the working conditions gap throughout Mississippi.
- Using mentoring and induction data, we will study teachers' perceptions of their preparation for teaching in Mississippi schools. We will also consider how school leadership and state policymakers may be able to support mid-level teaching professionals, who currently express a slightly lower opinion of their teaching conditions than their less or more experienced peers.

We look forward to continuing our support of Mississippi's most critical educational resource—its dedicated teaching corp.

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