





# Atmospheric Change

**A VCU study offers some wise ideas for boosting teacher morale, a key factor in student achievement.**

By **Tamara Sober and Jesse Senechal**

If you're in public education, you don't have to be told that teacher morale is a problem. You know because you see it, and maybe even live it. We could rattle off a few, likely familiar, reasons for low teacher morale: the lack of time to teach; the encroachment of outside influence and constraints on the classroom; initiative overload. And yet we also know the morale boost that comes from individual teachable moments with students. Those moments provide the joy and perspective that keep us going in our profession.

The evidence of struggles with teacher morale is far from anecdotal. Recent results from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher and other sources show teacher satisfaction at its lowest level in 25 years, and more than half feeling "under great stress several days a week." Social media has also become a common forum for teachers to speak out publicly about their struggles with the direction of the profession.

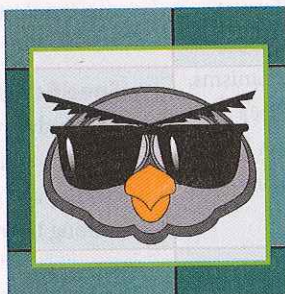
To learn more, a group of Richmond-area school divisions, all part of Virginia Commonwealth University's Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC), commissioned a study aimed at developing practical recommendations for addressing teacher morale. The goal was not to quantify how low morale had gotten, or to identify where it was low, but rather to *understand* the issue and seek ways to *improve* morale through policy and practice.

If you're a classroom teacher, you may be voicing a few of your own ideas out loud right now. We understand: At least one of the authors, a veteran teacher advocate with battle scars from failed attempts to use research to move policy, admittedly approached the study with a bit of skepticism. Don't we already have solutions for improving teacher morale? Haven't teachers been voicing these same concerns

for years to decision-makers? However, if we're looking to raise the visibility of the issue of teacher morale, what better tool than research sponsored by school divisions concerned with improving it?

And, about 18 months into the two-year study, that "bit of skepticism" was sharply challenged. On a cold February afternoon members of our research team were leaving a middle school where we had been shadowing and interviewing teachers. As we discussed our week, several of us were

awed by what we had experienced. We were in a school where a lot of things were (and still are) working, and there was clearly a relationship between the specific, building-level leadership style and relatively high teacher morale. This wasn't about staff members getting to do everything exactly as they pleased. On the contrary, they faced high demands and expectations. The key was that they had a voice in decision-making, including in how to implement policies mandated by central office; they were treated as professionals; and leadership was attentive to issues





such as fairness and consistency, factors we repeatedly found in this study to be tied to teacher morale.

### What We Learned About Teacher Morale

**Importance of roles and relationships.** Teachers said the ability to fulfill their teaching roles and the quality of their relationships while doing so were the keys to their job satisfaction and morale. They identified their primary role/relationship dynamic as the one with students; they find satisfaction in fulfilling the formal roles of teaching (e.g., planning lessons, delivering instruction, assessing student growth), but also emphasized the importance of personal relationships with students, both as a foundation for successful role fulfillment and as a valued outcome in itself. A similar dynamic existed between the teacher and her/his colleagues: they find satisfaction through engagement with colleagues in formal role relationships (e.g., participation on grade-level teams) and in interpersonal relationships.

**Policy effects on teacher work.** Most, if not all, teacher work roles are defined, to varying degrees, by division- and school-level policies. For example, lesson planning often involves adherence to lesson plan formats; many assessments are standardized; and professional collaboration may require structured protocols and reporting mechanisms. Because these policies can both support or hinder a teacher's ability to fulfill roles, they were a major point of discussion in our interviews. We found that teachers' policy discussions focused on five qualities:

1. **Coherence.** Does this policy make sense to me?
2. **Autonomy.** How much freedom does this policy allow for my professional judgment?
3. **Burden.** How much work is this?
4. **Fairness.** Is this policy designed to treat all teachers in a fair way?
5. **Compensation.** Am I being appropriately compensated for my work?

When policies effectively supported a teacher's ability to fulfill role responsibilities and develop strong relationships, job

satisfaction and morale went up. When policies interfered, satisfaction and morale suffered.

**The importance of leadership.** The principal plays a critical role in establishing the professional culture of the school. As with teachers, the work of the principal was discussed in terms of roles and relationships. Principals are responsible not only for implementing policies structuring the work of teachers, they also need to build trusting relationships and communicate in ways that lead to understanding and support for those policies. Teachers experienced higher job satisfaction when principals involved them in the decision-making process for implementing policies, and when

### Listen Online

To learn more from the researchers behind the study, you can also listen to the "Understanding Teacher Morale" podcast at [www.merc.soe.vcu.edu/abstract-podcast/](http://www.merc.soe.vcu.edu/abstract-podcast/). ■



they built trusting relationships and communicated positively with teachers.

### Specific Steps to Improve Teacher Morale

The study's report, titled "Understanding Teacher Morale," contains strategies for improving morale, identifies levers of change, and offers specific recommendations for next steps. Among the recommendations:

#### Rethinking the design and implementation of policy

- **Review existing and new policies that affect teacher work.** One of the key findings of our study was that teachers' frustrations were often connected to policies originating from the state and division level. School division personnel and building-level leaders should incorporate a process for examining how current and future policy impacts teachers' work.
- **Rethink the models of accountability and the role of data.** Our findings reveal teachers are frustrated with systems of accountability primarily based on reporting mecha-



nisms instead of authentic forms of observation by administrators and peers and dialogue that promotes professional reflection and learning. Teachers must exercise professional judgment in their practice over the issues of teaching, curriculum and student care. For this reason, school leaders should balance the need for accountability with increased autonomy. Absent these opportunities, expertise suffers.

- **Address the issue of load.** One of the ideas expressed by study participants was the desire for more time to “just teach.” Most felt overloaded by the number of students, number of course preparations, paperwork and the constant requirements of new initiatives. Overload has a number of negative effects, including compromising the quality of teaching, increasing stress, and upsetting work-life balance. Careful consideration should be given to anything that adds to a teacher’s workload.
- **Address issues of fairness.** Teachers’ perceptions of inequity are a common source of frustration. Division and school leaders should seek ways to address teachers’ concerns about inequities.
- **Address the issue of teacher compensation.** Teachers have realistic expectations regarding their salary limitations; however, compensation surfaced as an issue in relation to the changing nature of the profession. Division leaders and school principals should take public stands to raise awareness of the need for increased school funding and should publicly stand with teachers in their efforts to improve salaries.
- **Communicate policy rationale with clarity, consistency and transparency.** Morale improves when principals and school division leaders are intentional about sharing the rationale for their decisions. When teachers do not understand or fail to see value in policy mandates, and when required tasks divert time and attention from what their professional expertise suggests, they may resort to strategic compliance.

#### **Promoting school and division cultures that support teacher professionalism and leadership**

- **Be attentive to relational dynamics in schools.** Our study underscores the importance of relationships to the work of teachers. Policies should support creating time and space for teachers to forge authentic relationships.

## What They Said

**“Teachers are frequently bombarded with negative messages about their profession. They are often also bombarded with unachievable expectations.**

**I hope our communities will recognize the importance of working towards building positive morale in our schools. Good morale benefits the entire educational system. I hope this study will help more schools assess morale while inspiring them to take action to improve it.”**

— Debbie Gilfillan, a Henrico Education Association member who was on the study’s research team

**“Teachers are feeling more and more disconnected from the building and from society, so let’s go in and look at some of the reasons they feel this disconnect, and let’s adjust this, because teachers change every other profession.**

**The number one thing I would suggest is to survey teachers to find out the individual problems with morale...If it’s a serious issue of leadership, look at a change of leadership. Look at restructuring the organization. There is always something you can do to improve morale.”**

— Rodney Robinson, a Richmond Education Association member also on the study’s research team ■



- **Create structures to promote professional growth.** Teachers need more opportunities to develop their professional practice and engage with their professional community. While most schools have systems in place for professional development, often these systems do not effectively serve teachers' needs. Professional development systems should be designed with the model of professionalism in mind.
- **Institutionalize opportunities for teacher voice and leadership at both the school and division level.** Our findings revealed higher morale among teachers who felt their school principals fostered open and honest communication. Inviting teacher voice through both formal and informal structures leads to relational trust and creates alignment in expectations for teacher work and student outcomes. Soliciting teacher voice should not just be about allowing teachers to be heard.
- **Support principals.** As our findings show, principals play a critical role in teacher morale. Like teachers, principals are professionals. This means they must be able to use theories of leadership, adapt policies, and structure the complex systems that exist within schools in a way that is responsive to ever-changing and uncertain context. In this regard, school systems need not only to develop professional expertise among school leaders, but also be attentive to policies that may affect their ability to lead.

Specific recommendations for next steps also include developing a model for school-level teacher morale teams to address the issue within buildings. The teams could include teachers, non-instructional staff and school administrators, and could potentially use 11 teacher profiles developed in our

report as exemplars of the findings. These profiles are ideally suited for small group discussions to encourage discussion and analysis of school-level policies and practices that support or hinder morale. Findings from those discussions could lead to a list of school-specific recommendations.

### Teacher Morale Matters

Teacher morale's effects extend way beyond individual teachers. Morale is directly related to teacher retention and student achievement, and has significant human and financial costs. Retention of new teachers is of special concern, with over half of new teachers choosing to leave their school placements within the first five years. As teachers exit the profession, relying on new teachers to fill vacancies will become more difficult as fewer people choose a teaching career. Nationwide enrollments in traditional and alternative preparation dropped by 20 percent in 2013-2014 alone. It is noteworthy that the negative effects of teacher dissatisfaction are more frequent and intense in schools with the most academic and socioeconomic challenges. Teacher dissatisfaction, teacher absenteeism and teacher turnover are all higher in these schools, exacerbating the achievement gap and sustaining patterns of inequality. These are high stakes our schools and school divisions can't afford to ignore.

We encourage educators to check out the full report of the study at [www.merc.soe.vcu.edu](http://www.merc.soe.vcu.edu). Share it with local leaders and use it to begin conversations on improving teacher morale. Do it for your students! ■

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## VCU's Study By the Numbers

Over a two-year period, a 14-member research team, all current and former teachers, developed a framework for understanding teacher morale and designed the study to include observing and interviewing 44 teachers in three middle schools. The schools were specifically chosen and varied in accreditation status, student demographics and school-level leadership style. ■