

Study: Teacher Satisfaction, Collaboration Are Keys to Student Achievement

By Madeline Will on February 16, 2017 4:30 PM

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Teachers who are happy and satisfied with their job are probably better at it, past research (and general wisdom) has said. But a new study looks at exactly how teacher satisfaction affects student achievement—and how being a part of a professional learning community can make a major difference.

The study, **published this month** in the American Journal of Education, was conducted by Neena Banerjee, an assistant professor of public administration at Valdosta State University, and three professors of sociology and public policy from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The study used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, which followed a nationally representative sample of children from kindergarten in 1998 through middle school. That survey had also asked the children's teachers questions about their overall job satisfaction and the extent of teachers' collaboration with other teachers.

The new study's authors used data from the first four waves of data collection—up until 5th grade in 2004. They ended up with the data of 5,850 elementary students in public schools.

The authors found that students have higher reading achievement by 5th grade when they have teachers who enjoy teaching and think they are making a difference. The researchers did not find a significant relationship between students' math achievement and their teachers' job satisfaction.

However, the study found that when students have teachers who are dissatisfied with their jobs, the children who are in schools with a strong professional community score significantly higher in math achievement by 3rd and 5th grades. (This also held true for reading achievement in 3rd grade, but there was no difference in reading in 5th grade.)



"In other words, the presence of a strong professional community serves as a cushion that can mitigate some of the harmful effects on students when assigned to teachers with low levels of personal job satisfaction," the authors wrote.

Professional learning communities are when the school has a shared vision and culture where teachers are encouraged to collaborate with each other, with the goal of improving student learning. Past research has found that teachers tend to have higher job satisfaction when there is a strong, collaborative school culture.

The study concluded that school culture is a critical factor that can shape the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction and students' achievement.

The authors recommend that policymakers seek to find strategies to improve teacher job satisfaction. A 2012 MetLife survey **found that** only 44 percent of teachers are "very satisfied" with their jobs—the lowest it has been in more than two decades.

The authors also recommend that elementary schools develop professional learning communities—meaning hiring and training administrators who can communicate shared goals to staff and also obtaining staff buy-in for those goals.

"These efforts might also encourage teachers to seek new ideas and to learn from each other," the authors wrote. "At a minimum, a thriving school culture with a strong professional community ameliorates the challenges and frustrations that teachers otherwise experience, permitting them to find satisfaction in their jobs and absorbing some of the negative effects of teacher job dissatisfaction from translating into lower student achievement."

Image via Getty

For more on professional learning communities, download this free *Education Week Spotlight*.

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"The authors also recommend that elementary schools develop professional learning communities—meaning hiring and training administrators who can communicate shared goals to staff and also obtaining staff buy-in for those goals."

Rather than communicate the "shared goals" administrators need to be developing goals with their staffs. I keep waiting for an administrator to ask me and other teachers "What do you think we need to focus on?" "What do you need to so that your practice is the best it can be?"

Instead, of administrators developing and then "selling" goals to teachers, there needs to be collaboration with teachers involved in analyzing and setting goals. But, after ten years as a teacher, I have pretty much given up hope that my opinions, and those of my colleagues, will ever be of interest to administration.



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