

The Case for Working Conditions Training

“Ultimately, educator retention rates increase with supportive school administrators who understand the importance of collaboration with the educators with whom they work.”

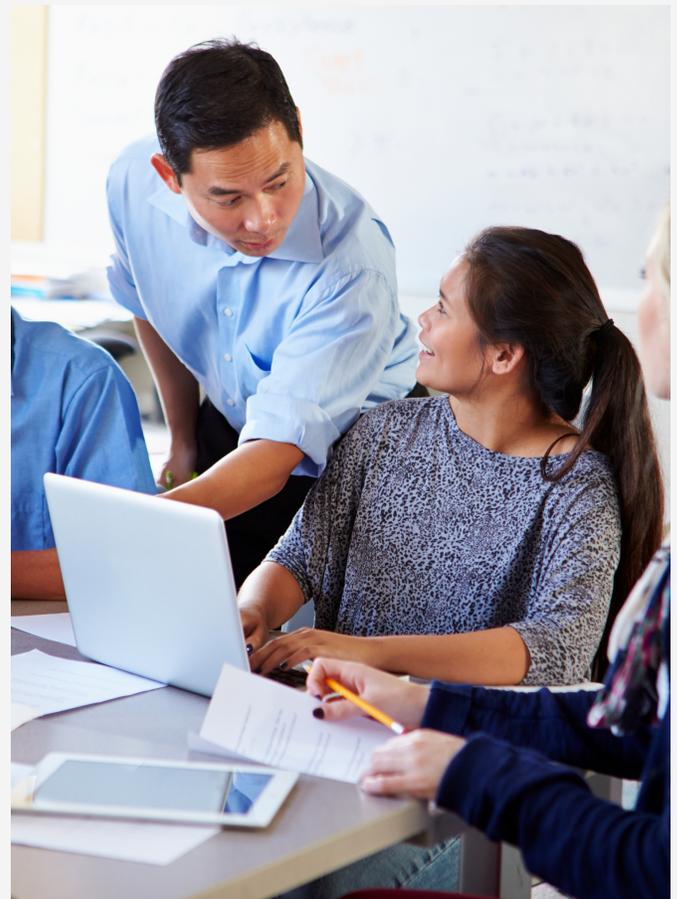
National Education Association, 9 Ways to improve educator working conditions; Published: 09/30/2022; <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/9-ways-improve-educator-working-conditions>

The Importance of a Healthy School Culture

On the surface, the above quote seems commonsensical and a well-covered topic for school employees. Numerous research studies and articles have covered this topic for decades. Educators and administrators alike will profess their commitment to and proficiency in collaboration and growing school culture. Yet many of my educational colleagues and friends will shrug-off any degree of prodding or inquiry into the current effectiveness of their staff collaboration. I hear comments about their culture being “good” or tales of prior staff training on things like PLCs or courageous conversations. Yet when systems are tested on their ability to address issues that spark high levels of tension and conflict...well, reality is uncovered.

Many of our school systems, despite good intentions or even prior training, still struggle to effectively navigate strong working relationships and collaboration. This fact is not solely attributed to the people in school systems. Rather all school staff are placed in highly volatile working situations—it’s to their credit they collaborate as well as they do! Annual staff turnover and cycles of changing initiatives make retaining even the best school culture a tremendous feat. Many staff

in schools work in isolated units (grade levels, departments, or the like) where culture can appear to be healthy. When a crisis or significant event occurs, these units can even rally together in unison to overcome. But lurking under the surface are red flags that a school building's working conditions are at risk.



CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Working Condition Red Flags

Every workplace has attributes that contribute to the health of the working environment. On their own, the warning signs or red flags might not flare up into anything significant. But when combined with other school or societal pressures they can land a school or district into requiring urgent action. These red flags include:

Misaligned Leadership Approaches



- Lack of trust-building before action
- Jumping from decision to decision too quickly
- Unrealistic demands
- Overstepping; understepping

Ineffective Communication



- Wrong mode; wrong time
- Too late; not enough diverse voice
- Mixed messages
- Not enough transparency

Office Politics



- Cliques and alienation
- Gossiping
- Silo groups
- Preferential treatment

Lack of Opportunity for Growth



- Lack of equal access to opportunities
- No established expectations
- Lack of meaningful performance feedback
- No psychological safety for errors

No Work Life Balance



- Leaders not modeling balance expectations
- No shared agreements among full faculty
- Not explaining how benefits outweigh urgency
- Perfectionism as a standard

Why it Matters

Strong school culture has been proven to be a key ingredient to school success. Any school staff member can tell you: when you like coming to work, you can be your best self and overcome challenges. Schools are hard places to work and ensuring high quality working conditions should be top of mind for teachers, administrators and school governance boards.

Education is currently facing an even bigger reason to care about school culture: An educator shortage that has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. The alarm bells are ringing on this problem that will impact everyone.

Researchers and advocacy groups agree that one of the solutions to surmount this issue is to pay closer attention to the working environment. One such group, the National Labor-Management Partnership (NLMP), has dedicated their work to improving educational outcomes by fostering and sustaining collaboration among education stakeholders. [Check out the NLMP Collaborating for Student Success Guidebook.](#)

“Educators are exhausted, demoralized, stressed, and overwhelmed. As a result, any serious solution to the educator shortage must address educator working conditions.”

CATALYST FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

What to Do about Working Conditions

Contribution by Ray Gaer

It's a fact: Schools have too many priorities and not enough time to effectively address them all. Each priority will require collective commitments to get to impact. Collective commitment can only be achieved through healthy working relationships. While top-down micromanagement might quickly complete checklists, CEC's experiences have shown pseudo buy-in rooted in fear and compliance falls quickly in the face of volatile conditions.

Building strong working conditions, therefore, becomes the catalyst for reaching your improvement priorities. It is not just a nice thing to do or say—it is required.

For example, a key element to any successful working relationship is for organizations and educational partners to have clear understandings of the collaborative goals and the rules of engagement. Studies have shown that districts where labor administration and labor have explored

and agreed upon specific goals and outcomes that are vital to each organization. Another essential element to a successful working partnership is that all educational partners need to understand and agree upon rules of civility and interaction to help provide a foundation of trust building where partners can explore solutions and ideas in an environment that fosters dignity and exploration.

Research has illustrated that when administration and labor are able to engage with collective goals and rules of engagement that they are able to achieve positive changes in the classroom that directly impact student outcomes. Educational partners who are using collaborative approaches can find and share solutions that take into consideration the practitioner in the classroom who is closest to the situation. Collaborative systems use the collective voices and ideas of all partners to explore meaningful solutions that take into consideration the concerns and needs of all stakeholders.

About the Authors

Ray Gaer is the President at ABC Federation of Teachers. A general education and a special education teacher for the first 14 years of his teaching career, Ray has been active in the union, has served on ABCFT's Executive Board as the Vice President At-Large, and has served the negotiating team for two decades. He also serves as an active Board Member and Secretary for CEC.

Shelley Taylor is the Executive Director of CEC and a National Board-Certified Teacher (NBCT). A former teacher, instructional coach, union president, and district-level administrator, Shelley serves Pre-K-12 settings with strong collaborative practices focused on continuous improvement and manages all programs, partnerships, and content for teacher evaluation, teacher mentoring and leadership, and inclusion practices, and oversees day-to-day operations of CEC's contracted services.



ASSESS YOUR RED FLAGS!

Catalyst for Educational Change (CEC) has a deep history partnering with schools and districts on working relationships and conflict resolution with a four-phase process, personalized to district needs and grounded in research and best practices.

Access Working Conditions resources and tools: <https://cecweb.org/cec-services/core-programs/working-relationships/>.