

SECOND OPINION

Teacher survey a tool for growth

The pressure is on our educators. Throughout our country, there are calls for school reform. We want higher academic achievement for our students, lower school dropout rates, higher graduation rates, “meaningful” high school diplomas that reflect students’ being career- or college-ready. We want our

students to be educated to be internationally competitive to lead our country forward. Over and over in the litany of concerns and ways to address them is the need for high-quality teachers.

If indeed high-quality teachers, well-prepared to meet the daily challenges in their classrooms, are the most important ingredient for our students’ academic success, then it makes sense that our school system and our community provide the necessary support to help our teachers be successful.

North Carolina takes teacher working conditions seriously and has biannually administered a teacher survey to ascertain teacher perceptions of their working conditions.

Guilford Education Alliance analyzed the 2010 Guilford County data from the statewide biannual Teacher Working Conditions Survey to determine how well we are meeting our obligation to provide



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optimum teacher working conditions. Comparisons were made to earlier surveys in 2006 and 2008. Eight areas are measured through questions on the survey: Time, Facilities and Resources, Community Support and Involvement, Managing Student Conduct, Teacher Leadership, School Leadership, Profes-

sional Development, and Instructional Practices and Support.

The responses of our teachers, collected through a protected website survey, provide our school administration, Guilford County Board of Education and the public with teachers’ perceptions of what conditions are considered good and supportive and what needs improvement.

There is an overall improvement in our teachers’ perceptions of working conditions, but for the third time, Guilford County scores are below the state average on 62 of 81 questions and most are below those of other urban districts.

Research on social capital has found that some of the “softer” working conditions, such as encouragement to collaborate, time for reflection and planning, coaching from leadership and appropriate staff development and training, can have great impact on employees’ performance. Although this

research is often referred to as “perceptions” rather than substantiated “facts,” we have found that perceptions on the culture of the school, the support received from leadership, and the professional context of the teachers’ work affect student achievement.

Of the 5,301 (88.7 percent) Guilford County teachers who completed the survey, fewer than two-thirds report there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their schools. Nearly 75 percent believe their school administrators support them in their work, but only 73.7 percent feel supported on maintaining classroom discipline.

Teaching is one of the most complex and demanding professions, and achieving professional excellence requires time, guidance and support.

The greatest concerns come from new teachers (those teaching less than three years), who report low levels of quality interaction with their mentors. These teachers often are enthusiastic, energetic and creative and bring fresh ideas and commitment to the profession. They can inspire more experienced teachers, who may find themselves jaded. These young professionals need support and attention to mature into master teachers.

Another important point the teachers made relates to use of

technology in the classroom as an instructional strategy. As we strive to provide a 21st-century education for our students, utilizing technology is important. It is reported that great differences exist between schools that have and utilize technology and those that don’t. Teachers report a need for continued staff development in order to use technology effectively.

Guilford Education Alliance hosted several focus groups with teachers from across the district. One of their recommendations is providing more opportunities to learn from each other. Establishing peer observations of the master teachers in each school is a cost-effective way to provide staff development.

In each school, our teachers are overcoming grave challenges every day, using best practices to achieve results. Observing these and discussing them among professional peers can be a meaningful, cost-effective professional experience and can enhance our children’s academic success.

The Teacher Working Conditions Survey must be utilized in our individual School Improvement Plans. The results should be taken seriously.

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