Teaching and Learning Conditions Matter in Public Schools and Classrooms: Key Considerations for Policymakers

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The Challenge:

Every child deserves a highly effective teacher in his/her classroom, but what makes good teaching possible and more likely to occur? Why do some schools produce higher-than-expected student growth than other schools? Which conditions in the learning environment have the greatest influence on teacher effectiveness?

To answer these questions, this brief explores new research that provides compelling evidence that teachers who work in schools with positive conditions are more effective at raising student achievement.

This brief helps policymakers better understand the powerful influences the school environment and working conditions have on teachers' effectiveness, their growth and development, and efforts to enhance student learning. The information is supported by the work of NYSUT's Innovation Initiative, involving six school districts, which has examined and taken actions to improve the conditions of the work environment. For purposes of this brief, teaching and learning conditions refer to a school's systems, relationships, resources, environments and personnel that contribute to the success of the school.

Based on the premise that successful teaching and learning is greatly influenced by the professional context and conditions of the school environment, the challenge is to ensure that all educators have the positive and favorable conditions that allow them to do their very best work so all students succeed. While unfavorable working conditions are no excuse for poor performance, neither is the lack of attention by policymakers and school leaders to create and sustain positive conditions that matter most for student achievement.

Historically, education policy has focused narrowly on identifying and removing teachers as a key strategy for boosting student achievement. Under New York's new evaluation plan, the consequences for lagging student achievement continue to rest solely with the individual teacher, with no recognition by policymakers of the relationship between positive teaching and learning conditions and the success of the teaching and learning process. Until policymakers are convinced that teaching and learning conditions are student learning conditions, efforts to improve student achievement will lag behind.

> *"The absence of an organizational perspective on teacher effectiveness leads to narrow dinner conversations and misinformed policy. We tend to ascribe teachers' career decisions to the students they teach rather than the conditions in which they work. We treat teachers as if their effectiveness is mostly fixed, always portable, and independent of school context. As a result, we rarely complement personnel decisions with organizational reforms that could benefit both teachers and students."*
>
> Dr. Matthew A. Kraft and Dr. John P. Papay
> Albert Shanker Institute
> May 28, 2015

What are teaching and learning conditions? The New Teacher Center (NTC), a nationally recognized organization dedicated to improving student learning by increasing teacher effectiveness, identifies eight constructs shown to strongly influence teacher effectiveness, development, retention and student achievement.

Figure 1: Impact of Teaching and Learning Conditions

Teacher Development

Teacher Retention

Teacher Effectiveness

Teaching and Learning Conditions Matter

School Leadership

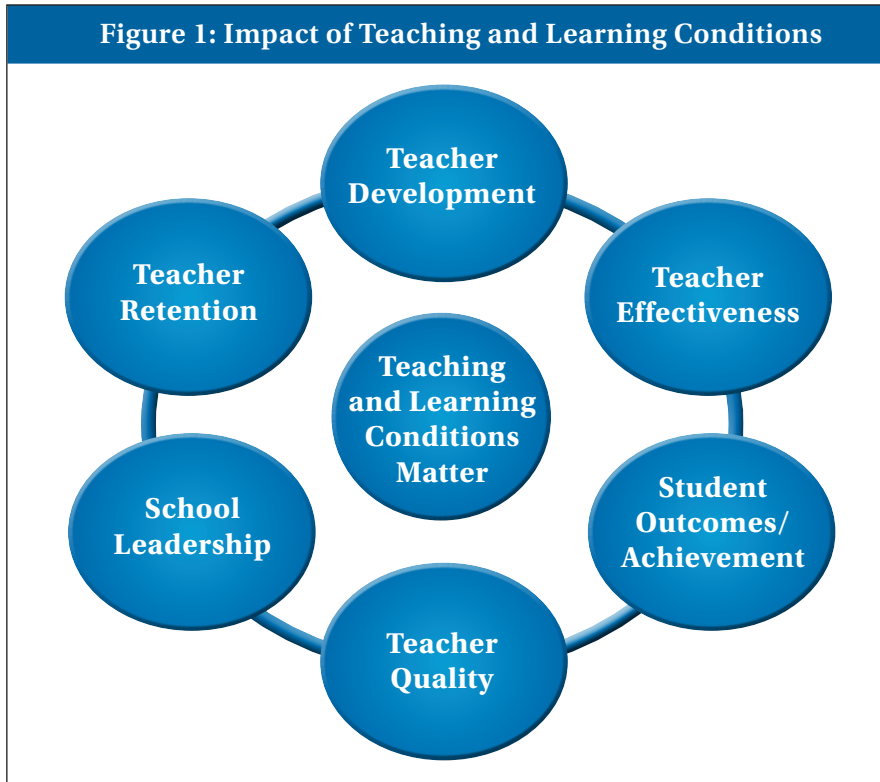Student Outcomes/ Achievement

Teacher Quality

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the conditions of the school and teacher and leader effectiveness, which is explored in more detail in this brief and a related NYSUT paper, *Teaching and Learning Conditions Matter: Key Considerations for Practitioners*, available at *www.nysut.org*.

The teaching and learning constructs include Time; Facilities and Resources; Community Support and Involvement; Managing Student Conduct; Teacher Leadership; School Leadership; Professional Development and Instructional Practices and Support. Chart 1 defines each construct and provides a sample survey question to assess the presence of the condition.

The Innovation Initiative: NYSUT's Teaching and Learning Conditions Initiative (TLCI) holds significant promise for ensuring that public schools are great places to teach and learn. This initiative is a research-based approach policymakers and school leaders can take to document and analyze how educators view the conditions and school environment, leading to improved outcomes for students.

The initiative was piloted in New York in 2012 with six school district labor/management teams as part of design and implementation of NYSUT's teacher evaluation and development (TED) system. Comprehensive teacher evaluation systems link teacher effectiveness and student achievement to school conditions in order to understand and improve teacher performance. The initiative allowed the school district teams to explore ways to create and sustain positive and supportive conditions that educators and students need to succeed. To achieve this goal, school district partners engaged in four concrete steps:

1. Develop a deeper understanding of the evidence supporting why teaching and learning conditions matter for teachers, principals and student achievement;

2. Administer a TLC survey to collect reliable data from educators about the supportive teaching and learning conditions in the district's schools;

3. Analyze the data and use the results to guide action planning and school improvement efforts; and

4. Build local capacity to create and sustain the favorable conditions teachers, principals and students need to succeed.

Chart 1: Teaching and Learning Constructs		
Construct	**Definition of Construct**	**Sample Survey Item**
Time	Available time to plan, collaborate and provide instruction, and eliminating barriers to maximize instructional time during the school day.	*Teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues.*
Facilities and Resources	Availability of instructional, technology, office, communication, and school resources to teachers.	*Teachers have sufficient access to a broad range of professional support personnel.*
Community Support and Involvement	Community and parent/guardian communication and influence in the school.	*This school does a good job of encouraging parent and guardian involvement.*
Managing Student Conduct	Policies and practices to address student conduct issues and ensure a safe school environment.	*Policies and procedures about student conduct are clearly understood by faculty.*
Teacher Leadership	Teacher involvement in decisions that impact classroom and school practices.	*Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership.*
School Leadership	The ability of school leadership to create trusting, supportive environments and address teacher concerns.	*The procedures for teacher evaluation are consistent.*
Professional Development	Availability and quality of learning opportunities for educators to enhance their teaching.	*Sufficient resources are available for professional development in my school.*
Instructional Practices and Support	Data and support available to teachers to improve instruction and student learning.	*Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery (i.e., pacing, materials and pedagogy).*

Source: New Teacher Center

The TLC Survey is a statistically valid and reliable instrument to assess whether working conditions in particular schools and districts support effective teaching, student learning and teaching quality.

The TLC Survey is NOT an assessment of the school climate or how people feel, including their morale or happiness with specific policies in the school or district. The survey does NOT provide information as to why teachers perceive conditions the way they do, which must be gained through a data analysis process and further conversations and engagement with stakeholders.

Benefits of the Innovation Initiative: Research on school district efforts to improve student achievement indicates that collaboration among labor and management is a key lever for building district and school capacity to improve student learning. Researchers (Futernick, K., McClellan, S., Vince, S., & Shirley, D., 2013) concluded that "labor/management partnerships are crucial for districts attempting to implement innovative practices that improve teaching and learning." Stakeholder involvement is also a major benefit of this initiative. The TLCI survey is a full population survey, which means the perceptions of all educators, not just a small sample, are included in the study. This approach:

- Sends a clear message that it is important to hear from all stakeholders (teachers and administrators). Getting authentic data about the views, experiences and perceptions from all key stakeholders is welcome and important.

- Ensures results are representative of all educators in the school and district. The higher the response rate, the more confidence stakeholders will have in using the results to inform school improvement.

- Generates district- and school-level data and produces school-specific reports.

- Provides critical data about the context in which educators work and are expected to perform. The data will help identify potentially important school patterns and district trends to inform decisions about strategies and solutions to improve conditions.

- Identifies the positive school conditions that support successful teaching and learning.

By documenting and analyzing how teachers and principals view their schools' conditions, school leaders and policymakers are able to make evidence-based decisions regarding policies and practices educators and students need to succeed.

In piloting the survey, the six school districts captured the voices of 1,400 teachers and principals. The aggregated data was categorized into four major constructs (Community Support and Involvement, Instructional Practice and Support, School Leadership, and Time). Chart 2 illustrates how TLC results and other data sources can be displayed to guide school improvement decision-making.

To administer the (teacher and principal) surveys and leverage the reporting tools, your district must first be utilizing MyLearningPlan PDMS and/or MyLearningPlan OASYS. These integrated online systems are used by a large majority of NYS school districts to support professional learning and growth. More information about MLPSurvey may be accessed on the NYSUT website at *http://www.nysut.org/tlci* via the MLP Survey Tool link in the left menu.

Condition	Highly Favorable Response Rate	Less Favorable Response Rate	Impact of Less Favorable Responses	Other Data Sources	School Improvement Strategy to Address the Condition
			Chart 2: Illustration of TLC Results for School Improvement		
Community Support and Involvement	71% agree their school does a good job of encouraging parent/ guardian involvement.	44% agree parents are supportive of teachers.	Lack of parent support hinders efforts to improve student achievement.	■ Parent Survey ■ Parent/ Teacher Conference	*Review communications strategies to ensure all teachers are engaging in ongoing and positive communications with parents.* *Organize a parent focus group to identify reasons for perceived lack of parent support.*
Instructional Practice and Support	81% agree teachers are encouraged to use assessment data to inform their instruction.	49% report teachers work in professional learning communities (PLC) to develop and align instructional practices.	Limited and irregular access to peers within the school community may prevent educators from helping peers develop and improve practice to increase student achievement.	■ District PD Plan ■ Teacher Schedules ■ Teacher/ Pupil Ratios ■ Instructional Expenditures ■ Teacher Evaluation ■ Student Achievement	*Review professional development opportunities to assess whether teachers are prepared to analyze and use their assessment data effectively.* *Create opportunities for educators to organize a PLC to focus on a topic or issue informed by the assessment data.*
School Leadership	85% agree teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction.	47% agree there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their schools.	Lack of trust hinders productive collaboration and sharing of information for improvement and, over time, contributes to teacher attrition. Building trust is crucial to ensure school improvement proceeds smoothly and effectively since teachers will be more motivated to try new strategies because they trust school leaders to support them.	■ School Climate Survey ■ TED Teacher Evaluation/ Self–Reflection	*Assess school climate and level of trust using a variety of methods including focus groups, observational methods, interviews, town hall discussions, study circles, participatory action research, and student, staff and family surveys.* *Adopt actions that demonstrate appreciation for the work of teachers and staff, protect confidentiality, have an open door policy, honor agreements, set standards, support teachers in meetings, share decision-making and power, and support teacher leadership.*
Time	No highly favorable responses reported for any questions related to time.	48% report that sufficient time and systems to protect non-instructional time are not in place in their schools.	Lack of non-instructional time results in insufficient time to plan, collaborate with peers, discuss student work and effective instruction, engage in professional development and action research to improve student learning outcomes.	■ Teacher Schedules ■ Teacher/student Ratios ■ Professional Development ■ Teacher Evaluation	*Review school policies related to instructional time; involve teachers in creating and refining the school schedule; define and set expectations for use of collaborative time.*

What Research Tells Us about Teaching and Learning Conditions

1. Positive teaching and learning conditions significantly correlate to improved student achievement. (Ladd, 2009; Hirsch & Ferguson, 2014)

2. The most predictive working conditions are related to the social conditions of the school as a workplace, which provide a context in which teachers can work and succeed. (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012)

3. Supportive professional environments support teachers' development and effectiveness more over time. (Kraft & Papay, 2014)

4. Conditions such as professional development and school leadership have a more direct impact on teachers' ability to do their jobs. (Leithwood, 2006; Wallace Report, 2011)

5. School leadership matters a great deal compared to other conditions; it is both a "base" condition and a "teaching enabler" condition. (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hirsch & Ferguson, 2014)

6. Low teacher retention in high-needs schools "are driven largely by teachers fleeing the dysfunctional and unsupportive work environments in the schools to which low-income and minority students are most likely to be assigned." (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012).

7. The existence of positive teaching and learning conditions, where educators are valued, collaborate to improve instruction and engage in meaningful professional development, is necessary to enable educators to raise student achievement. New studies (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012; Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ferguson & Hirsch 2014, Kraft & Papay, 2015), provide convincing evidence that teachers working in more supportive environments become more effective at raising student achievement over time, versus those working in less supportive environments.

8. Studies also find the antithesis to be true — poor working conditions hamper teachers' efforts to improve their practice, since improvement is related to the opportunities, quality and supports needed to improve teaching practice. (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012 & 2014)

9. Every child deserves a highly effective teacher in his/her classroom, and research tells us that gains in student achievement are more likely if teachers work in collaborative groups and local capacity of the school staff. (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Seashore-Louis, K., Wahlstrom, K.L., Leithwood, K. & Anderson, S.E., 2010).

Do Teachers and Principals View Conditions Differently?

Based on analysis of data during the past decade, NTC concluded that, "teachers and principals perceive conditions quite differently." Teachers, regardless of their background and experience, have similar perceptions of the conditions in their schools. Principals, on the other hand, tend to view the same conditions more positively than teachers. Given this disparity, it is critically important to understand **why** and **what** matters most to teachers since students achieve at higher levels in schools where teachers report the presence of positive and supportive conditions.

The challenge is identifying the factors school leaders can influence in increasing student achievement. For example, the quality of support of school leadership, opportunities for meaningful teacher leadership and collaborative time to work with peers are important factors to address given the impact on teacher effectiveness and retention. According to Eric Hirsch, former director of the NTC, "Such supports or the lack of them have a significant impact on teaching and learning because teachers' perceptions are their reality; therefore, teachers' behavior and efficacy are a direct result of those views." (Hirsch, Sioberg & Germuth 2010).

Principals also need favorable and supportive conditions to do their jobs. Principals' working conditions influence their ability and success as school leaders. (Hirsch and Ferguson, 2014). As school leaders, principals are responsible for creating and sustaining the positive teaching and learning conditions teachers and student need. Principals must find out what matters, build trust among teachers and stakeholders, and promote school improvement. Teachers however, must recognize that many aspects of a school's conditions are beyond the principal's control and are influenced by federal, state and district policies. Survey data can also be used to identify professional development needs for principals and school leaders in order to enhance their ability to work collaboratively with staff, foster teacher leadership and facilitate successful school improvement.

Labor/Management Partnerships: A Vehicle to Advance Innovation

The TLC Initiative presents an opportunity for labor and management to bring about positive change in public schools for the good of students by making sure every school is a great place to teach and learn. To launch a Teaching and Learning Conditions Initiative in a school district requires six major steps:

Step 1: Organize a Labor/Management Team: The team is responsible for launching, overseeing and ensuring the goals of the initiative are realized. Depending on the size of the district, labor/management team members should include the union president, superintendent, a representative from every building, administrators to represent elementary, middle and high school levels, a central office staff and a survey coordinator.

Step 2: Create a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA): The MOA outlines the purpose and intent of the initiative and provides assurances about the confidentiality and use of the survey data. The MOA must also convey that the intent of the Innovation Initiative is to improve schools, not to discipline or to evaluate personnel. Sharing this statement with members so all will understand the purpose of the survey and the appropriate use of the data is imperative.

Step 3: Develop a Stakeholder Engagement/Communications Plan: The strategy must create awareness and understanding of teaching and learning conditions, building buy-in and support during the survey administration phase. Ensure data is disseminated widely and create opportunities for deep and reflective conversations about the findings and how the findings will be used for school improvement.

Step 4: Administer the Survey: Promote the survey to ensure high response rates from teachers and principals. Provide time for teachers to take the survey during the school day and offer incentives for schools achieving a 100 percent response rate.
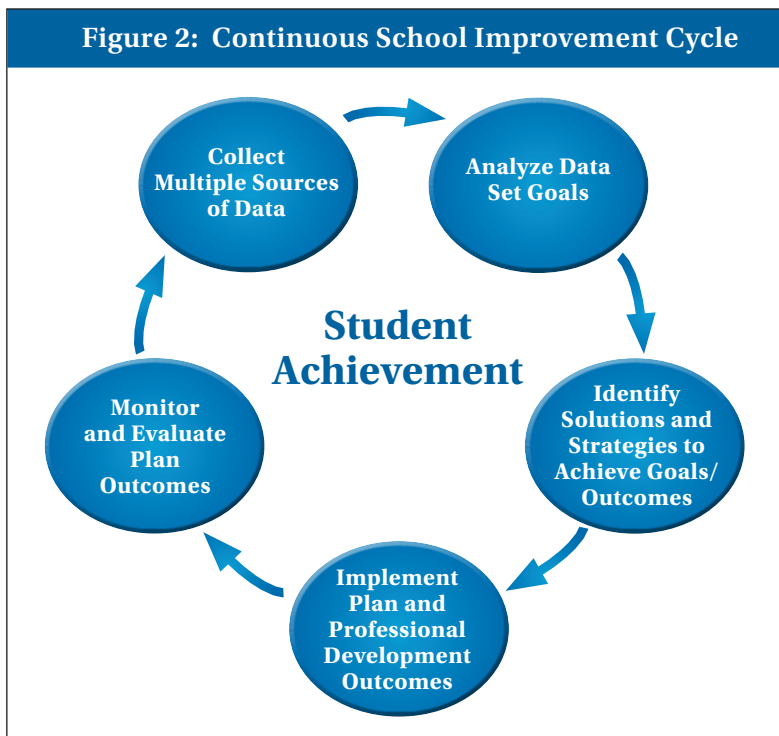
A 2011 study by the U.S. Department of Education described labor management collaboration as a "vehicle to advance both student achievement and innovation in schools." Several studies by Dr. Saul Rubenstein, Rutgers University, highlight new understandings of "the value labor/management partnerships can bring to organizational performance by creating a positive climate for teacher collaborations, which leads to innovation and an infrastructure for problem solving."

Step 5: Analyze the Data: Ensure the survey data are viewed as part of a larger picture of many important factors, and are not used to unilaterally and arbitrarily judge individuals or schools or a school system's effectiveness. Survey data should be analyzed with other information to make informed decisions. Teaching and learning conditions develop and evolve over time; and are bigger than any one person, and it will take everyone in a school to improve them.

Step 6: Develop a School Improvement Plan: Develop a plan that is doable. The plan must make creating and sustaining the conditions that address student achievement the top priority. The team must also monitor implementation of the plan and use data to make revisions when appropriate. Pursue and promote best practices and actions that create the collaborative relationships necessary for continuous school improvement and student achievement.

Elements of Successful School Improvement

As depicted in Figure 2, successful TLC Initiative engages all stakeholders in a collaborative process to sustain the conditions for continuous student growth. Recognizing that teaching and learning conditions affect multiple dimensions and organizational levels (teacher/classroom, grade/department, building/school, district/principal and community-wide/parents), the process must be continuous, ongoing, and sustained over an extended period of time. For a school improvement effort to be productive, the district's labor/management team should consider the following elements:

Figure 2: Continuous School Improvement Cycle

Collect Multiple Sources of Data

Analyze Data Set Goals

Student Achievement

Monitor and Evaluate Plan Outcomes

Identify Solutions and Strategies to Achieve Goals/ Outcomes

Implement Plan and Professional Development Outcomes

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Stakeholder engagement is vital to effective school improvement. Begin by acknowledging the power and importance of those involved in the complex and daily work of educating students. Make sure the process is inclusive with broad representation of stakeholders to capture multiple perspectives of as many people as possible in the development of the plan. Communication is essential to create a mechanism for ongoing communications and feedback at every phase of the process.

- **Goals and Solutions:** Goal-setting charts the course for school improvement and measures progress. Decisions about goals and solutions should be based on analysis of teaching and learning conditions data and other important sources (i.e., performance, practice, student, etc.) of data and research for school improvement.

- *Professional Development:* Professional development leveraged for school improvement will have an impact on student achievement because it will increase the capacity of individuals, staff and schools to grow and develop in order to meet student needs. The school improvement plan should outline professional development opportunities so educators gain, improve and refine skills and knowledge to improve outcomes for students, and work collaboratively toward that goal. The plan must also identify how professional development will be assessed, the evidence to determine whether the professional development is effective and steps to sustain professional learning over time.

- *Monitoring and Evaluation:* Monitoring and evaluation is necessary to ensure the school improvement plan is working. Create a mechanism for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of outcomes at regular intervals to determine whether school improvement strategies and solutions are having an impact on student achievement. Evaluating the impact of the action plan for school improvement brings the process full circle.

- *Improvement Occurs over Time:* Building a collaborative school culture, creating trusting relationships, adopting new policies and instructional practices all take time. Begin with the end in mind so school improvement becomes a regular part of school practice, not a one-shot deal or response to a crisis.

> *The school improvement plan must make creating and sustaining the conditions that address student achievement the top priority.*

Teaching and Learning Conditions in Action

North Syracuse Central School District (NSCSD): The efforts of the labor/management team resulted in a 72 percent survey response rate. Overall, 86 percent of NSCSD educators rated their school as a good place to work and learn. The most favorable conditions were related to Facilities and Resources, Community Support and Involvement, and Managing Student Conduct; Time and Instructional Practices and Support were identified as areas to investigate. To ensure stakeholders were fully invested in the school improvement process, each school established a building planning team to facilitate discussions with educators, solicit recommendations and create action plans to implement during the next school year. One of the elementary buildings used the survey data on the lack of collaborative time to implement a weekly end-of-day dismissal procedure that now allows for grade-level meeting time once a week.

The labor/management team launched a second survey in May 2015 with all schools in the district meeting the 50 percent minimum response rate. Additionally, a higher percentage of principals responded to the survey than in 2012, signaling a deeper understanding of how the data can be used to support their effectiveness as a school leader. The data will be analyzed and used for school improvement planning during the next school year. The 2012 survey data serves as baseline data to measure the impact of the strategies implemented from 2012-15 to increase collaborative time, and whether collaborative time is being used effectively to improve instruction and accelerate student achievement.

Marlboro Central School District (MCSD): MCSD labor/management team developed a communications plan to secure buy-in and support for the teaching and learning conditions initiative. The plan included developing promotional materials, hosting

building-level meetings, conducting webinars and posting information on the union website. Working collaboratively, central administration and union leadership reviewed the survey results. The results (based on a 66 percent response rate) garnered highly favorable (90 percent) responses related to Community Support and Involvement, School Leadership and Instructional Practices and Support. At the same time, the conditions and factors related to Teacher Leadership and Professional Development should be explored. For one school building, the data supported the need for increased opportunities for ongoing dialogue between educators and administrators. To ensure transparency, all school personnel in the district received the survey results which building principals subsequently discussed with their teachers, indicating the conditions the school should be proud of and areas that needed more attention. As a result, one building principal reinstated the former Principal's Advisory Council comprising staff from the building as a vehicle to address current and future issues to teaching and working conditions at the school. Marlboro is working to sustain the positive conditions that exist in the district and plans to administer the survey again in 2016.

Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD): In 2012, 56 percent of PCSD educators responded to the survey. Educators cited Instructional Practices and Support as the most positive condition given their access to assessment data in a timely manner and opportunities to work in professional learning communities. Responses indicated that critical conditions related to Time, Facilities and Resources and Managing Student Conduct is of great concern to educators. The data also suggested there is insufficient time to make improvements in instructional practice, given the lack of time to accomplish instructional responsibilities. Given the use of PLCs in Poughkeepsie, educators explored ways to vary time based on subject and student priorities.

Plattsburgh City School District (PCSD): Plattsburgh's labor/management team's promotional efforts resulted in the highest (81 percent) response from educators among the Innovation districts, including two schools with 100 percent response rates. Overall, data reported by PCSD educators was extremely favorable. The data identified positive conditions in the areas of Managing Student Conduct and Teacher Leadership, and several aspects of Time and School Leadership. The data shows a culture of collaboration exists in Plattsburgh as evidenced by the fact that teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles, are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues, and are viewed by administrators as effective leaders in the school. PCSD educators also have positive views about school leadership including the efforts made to address teacher concerns and consistency of teacher evaluation procedures. Educators also cited the lack of availability of resources, and differentiated and targeted professional development to meet individual teacher needs as priority areas when developing the district's Professional Development Plan (PDP). The labor/management team conducted building meetings to discuss the findings and solicit recommendations for improvements. As a first step, to address the issue of professional development, the district sent a team of administrators and teachers to a NYSUT-sponsored Professional Development Academy in spring 2014 to learn how to create more powerful learning designs targeted to teachers' needs, link evaluation outcomes with support and make adjustments in the district's PDP to reflect new knowledge.

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