



Canadian Teachers' Federation  
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants



# **Work-Life Balance and the Canadian Teaching Profession**

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### Putting Canadians' work-life balance in context

Over the past few decades Canada has experienced sweeping demographic, social, economic and technological changes. These changes have had, and continue to have, a major impact on the work-life balance of Canadians – that is, on our ability to balance work and personal demands.

Linda Duxbury and Christopher Higgins<sup>i</sup>, leading thinkers on organizational well-being, have been studying work-life balance issues in Canada since the early 1990s. They note that, in addition to significant demographic changes including “increased longevity, coupled with declining fertility rates, [which] means that Canada’s population is aging as is its workforce” (Duxbury & Higgins, p. 3), the structure of Canadian families has changed dramatically over the past few decades. They paint this portrait of the complex nature of contemporary families:

Canadian families today look very different than in the past. They are smaller; more diverse in terms of structure, patterns of functioning and heritage; more complex; less stable; less likely to have as much free time; and more likely to break up. There are also now more (1) dual-income families; (2) working heads of single-parent families; (3) working women of all ages; (4) working mothers, particularly mothers of young children; (5) men with direct responsibility for family care; (6) workers caring for elderly parents or relatives; and (7) workers in the “Sandwich Generation” who are responsible for both childcare and eldercare. (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013, p. 3)

Economic factors also have a bearing on our ability to balance our work and personal lives. This includes the growth in non-standard low-wage precarious jobs in the service sector combined with fewer well-paying unionized jobs in the manufacturing sector and downsizing by Canadian private and other organizations during a prolonged economic recession. Duxbury and Higgins also remark on the “polarization in the hours Canadians spend in paid employment: some Canadians devote long hours to their work (fearing for their jobs and working in intensely competitive work environments), while others struggle to get enough hours of paid employment to provide for themselves and their families.” (p. 4)

In addition as Duxbury and Higgins note, rapid technological change has served to intensify working conditions by creating expectations for rapid response and 24/7 availability, often blurring the line between work and home life.

Technological advances that began several decades ago have exacerbated many of these issues by allowing people to work “anytime, anywhere.” In many cases, these advances have blurred the boundaries between work and non-work, increased the pace of work and changed service delivery expectations. (p. 4)

Some of these factors also impact the work-life balance of the teaching profession.

Not surprisingly there are high economic costs associated with work-life imbalance in Canada. According to Duxbury and Higgins, “our inability to balance our jobs and our home

life is costing corporate Canada as much as \$10-billion a year in rising absenteeism, lost output, lower productivity, missed deadlines and grumpy customers". (McKenna, 2012)

### What we know about teacher workload

Teacher workload issues have been well documented in Canada as in many other countries. Many of these studies have been conducted by teacher unions themselves.<sup>ii</sup> In a literature review on teacher workload prepared by Calgary Public Teachers ATA Local 38 and the Alberta Teachers' Association for a study of the work-life of Calgary public school teachers, the authors note that:

Studies from across Canada consistently show that teachers work an average of 50 to 55 hours per week. When asked to estimate how much time they spend on work-related activities, teachers tend to underestimate their hours of work. Although reported work time tends to vary depending on a teacher's sex, years of experience, geographical location and specific assignment, these correlations are relatively weak, suggesting that overwork is a universal problem affecting teachers not only in Canada but in such other countries as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Sweden and the United States. (ATA, 2012, p. 11)

What does the growing research base on teacher workload tell us? These are the conclusions drawn from the literature review (excerpted from the report on the work-life of Calgary teachers, pp. 11-12):

- Teachers work 10 to 20 hours per week outside of regular school hours. These long hours create stress and exhaustion, which, in turn, lead to high rates of absenteeism and burnout (Naylor and White 2010).
- The work of teachers is highly complex and involves a wide range of tasks. As a result, teachers often multitask during the work day, a situation that sometimes prevents them from focusing on such higher-order activities as planning, engaging in professional development and reflecting on their practice, activities that would almost certainly improve their effectiveness as teachers over the long term.
- Students have a wide range of learning needs, and teachers lack the supports and resources necessary to support an increasingly diverse student population.
- The current emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability increases the amount of time that teachers spend on paperwork, administration, and formal student assessment and reporting (Day and Gu 2010).

A recent teacher workload study initiated by the Northwest Territories Teachers' Association (NWTTA) in collaboration with the Yukon Teachers' Association (YTA) and the Nunavut Teachers' Association (NTA), with the support of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), sheds new light on the unique realities and working conditions of Northern educators.

The study which notes that “teachers are surviving, but are far from thriving” (p. 6) cites several factors contributing to challenging working conditions for Northern teachers including the following (excerpted from the report, p. 5):

- External reporting demands and curriculum guidelines, especially difficult when multiplied by diverse needs and ability levels under one teacher’s tutelage.
- Stress related to non-instructional issues like student behaviour, student and family mental health and/or addictions, and poverty. Teachers stressed that students’ basic needs must be met before learning can take place.
- Gaps and lags in teachers’ cultural literacy with respect to teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students. This issue is exacerbated by a perpetual cycle of novice teachers who start out in rural or remote schools and then leave these communities, or leave the profession due to isolation and stress.

In 2012 the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation contracted with the Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit (SIDRU) of the University of Regina’s faculty of education to conduct a study intended to obtain “a better understanding of the complexities and challenges associated with teacher time in Saskatchewan.” The study consisted of an online survey of 950 educators and 10 in-depth teacher interviews. Three broad themes emerged from the findings:

1. *Teachers’ commitment to and concern for education* – includes the aspirations teachers have, their idealism and their concern for students, and those aspects of their work in which they experience satisfaction, autonomy and agency. On the importance of professional autonomy, the authors note that for teachers,  
  
the sense of professional autonomy includes being able to choose professional development opportunities that align more appropriately with their needs and interests rather than only the interests or priorities of the school division or the Ministry of Education. For teachers, professional autonomy translates into having more flexibility and decision-making authority over what and how they teach. While all participants recognize the need to be accountable to curriculum goals and objectives, teachers appreciate being trusted to use their own judgment. (p. 12)
2. *Barriers to teacher and student success* – includes the primary consequences of work intensification. Teachers are experiencing increased demands of rapid and extensive changes, increased expectations for accountability, and decreased supports provided to and for students.
3. *Compromises to teacher commitment to education* – includes the indirect consequences of work intensification. Teachers face a perceived lack of appreciation of and support for their professionalism, and increased pressures on their personal lives and on their health and well-being.

The study's authors, Drs. Carol Schick and James McNinch of SIDRU, state that increasing teacher workload and work intensification need to be understood and interpreted within the context of broad educational policies and trends:

The complexity of teachers' time has not been fully appreciated. To date, teacher time has been viewed through a narrow lens resulting in a limited understanding of the political, social and professional environments within which teachers work. Furthermore, educational trends at the local, national and international levels have put increasing pressure upon teachers. (p. 1)

Schick and McNinch go on to state that:

Reforms in education are part of the broader efforts of many countries to refashion and restructure their public institutions, often in response to the idea that subjection to the market creates tangible returns on efficiency. Indeed, developments discussed in regard to education cannot be divorced from wider ideological debates surrounding the delivery of public services. Many teachers choose the teaching profession out of a desire to help children learn, but as market pressures impinge upon educational policy, the idealistic impulse of teachers becomes debased and job satisfaction diminishes. Furthermore, centralized attempts to control the teaching process for the supposed economic benefit of the country, state or province has similar deleterious effects on the teaching profession. (p. 13)

For example as noted earlier centralized test-based accountability frameworks remain a prominent feature of the education reform landscape.

Teachers in the study expressed frustration at having little input into education decisions, despite "their knowledge and expertise on education matters", which have an impact on their working conditions. Such decisions are imposed on them by "individuals who have little or no classroom experience and, therefore, are far removed from recognizing what is in the best interests of students and teachers in a classroom setting." (p. 13)

A study by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) on teacher work-life balance conducted by Duxbury and Higgins compared a sample of nearly 2,500 Alberta teachers with national findings from over 25,000 employed Canadians. The study found that teachers work more hours per week than most Canadians and "exhibit high work overload, high work-family conflict and are significantly less likely to have any forms of workplace flexibility." (ATA, March 12, 2013)

The study also found that "workload and work-life issues may be having a negative impact on the well-being of a substantive portion of teachers in Alberta." (Duxbury & Higgins, p. 51) Specifically, the majority of teachers reported high levels of perceived stress (defined in the study as "the extent to which one perceives one's situation to be unpredictable, uncontrollable and burdensome"), significantly greater than was observed in the total sample. Almost half of teachers (47%) reported high levels of depressed mood (defined as "a state characterized by low energy and persistent feelings of helplessness and hopelessness"), again a higher level than was observed in the total sample.



According to the ATA's Associate Coordinator of Research, J-C Couture,

the study's overarching conclusion is clear: "Work time and work location flexibility have the potential to balance work and family demands by increasing an employee's ability to control, predict and absorb change in work and family roles. Unfortunately, the data from this study are unequivocal – Alberta teachers have very little workplace flexibility or control over their work domain or their work schedule." (Couture, 2013)

While some of this inflexibility is related to the fundamental nature of teachers' work – their time at work corresponds to a fixed school day – an important aspect of this lack of flexibility in the workplace may be related to organizational culture (defined in the study as "the unwritten rules and corporate norms that dictate how things are done, how things work, what is to be done and what is valued in the organization (i.e., "the way things are done around here")." Two sets of organizational beliefs were explored in the study (Duxbury & Higgins, pp. 53-54):

- the belief that the culture values employees who keep their personal issues out of the workplace
- the belief that the culture values employees who always give priority to work

Interestingly, teachers in the ATA sample were significantly more likely than those in the total sample to perceive that their employer values and rewards those who keep their work and family lives separate, and that their organization values an employee who is available for work 24/7 (Duxbury & Higgins, pp. 53-54).

Another significant finding (supported by both the ATA and total samples) suggests that the traditional division of labour at home between women and men does not appear to have changed as much as we might like to think – women were more likely than men to report that they have primary responsibility for childcare in their families. The authors state that "this finding suggests that gender-role expectations with respect to parenting have not changed substantially over time despite the influx of women into the paid labour market. The finding also suggests that many women in Canada and teachers in Alberta 'work a second shift' at home. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that half of the teachers in the ATA sample have very considerable demands at home." (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013, p. 48)

Duxbury notes that Canadians employed in the "caring professions" such as nursing, teaching and policing are at greater risk of suffering from burnout than those in other professions (*ATA Magazine*, June 2012). The NWTTA et al. study discusses some of the reasons for this:

In human services occupations that require extensive contact with and care for others – nurses, clergy, teachers, social workers and childcare workers, for example – the care and preservation of "human capital" becomes all the more important. Indeed these occupations run a higher than average risk of "burnout" because of the demands associated with "dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems" (Maslach, 2003, p. 2). Teaching is

highly performative, highly structured, and intensely demanding of our human capacities for meeting the needs of others. As a result, teaching is consistently ranked as one of the most stressful occupations (Burke & McAteel, 2007). (p. 6)

### CTF survey on teacher work-life balance

In February and March 2014, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) conducted an online survey of elementary and secondary teachers on issues related to work-life balance. The purpose of the survey was to obtain teachers' perspectives on:

- issues that contribute to work-related stress and work-life imbalance.
- factors that may contribute to improving teacher work-life balance.

The survey was distributed to teachers through CTF's member organizations. The response to the survey was overwhelming – we received over 8,000 responses from teachers across the country, the largest response to a CTF survey to date.

These are among the key findings:

- The vast majority of teachers told us they feel torn between their teaching responsibilities and their responsibilities outside the workplace (54% indicated significantly). Women were more likely than men to report feeling this way.
- A majority of teachers (79%) believe their stress related to work-life imbalance has increased over the last five years; only 4% said it had decreased over this period.
- 85% of teachers reported that work-life imbalance is affecting their ability to teach the way they would like to teach – 35% indicated that it was having a significant impact.
- Teachers were asked to identify sources of stress associated with their conditions of professional practice. They told us that the top stressor in their work environment is *the inability to devote as much time as they would like to each of their students*. Other important stressors include:
  - issues related to class composition and students with special educational needs, including development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as well as program adaptations or modifications for students who do not necessarily require an IEP, or have not been identified as needing an IEP.
  - lack of time for planning with colleagues.
  - lack of time for marking and grading student work.
  - insufficient human and material resources to support the curriculum.
  - lack of preparation time.

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It is noteworthy that lack of time is a theme that cuts across several of the stressors identified by teachers.

- Regarding teacher autonomy (defined in the survey as teachers' ability to exercise their professional judgment in their daily work), respondents indicated that they felt they had the most autonomy with respect to pedagogical approaches in their classes, extra-curricular activities, and student assessment and evaluation practices. They told us they had the least autonomy in terms of curriculum development and implementation, professional development and workload.
- While over half of teachers (among those teaching for at least five years) felt that their professional autonomy had decreased (either somewhat or significantly) over the past five years, the majority of respondents told us that enhancing their level of professional autonomy would have a positive impact on their overall work-life balance.
- Outside of the work environment, most teachers reported that they experience stress related to having insufficient time to spend with their own children, spouse or partner; for caregiving for family and friends in need; or for personal recreational pursuits. Women were more likely than men to report experiencing stress related to having insufficient time to spend with their own children; for caregiving for family and friends; or for recreational pursuits.
- Respondents were also asked to select, from a list of 14 items, the four top priority areas they felt would improve their work-life balance and enable them to become a more effective teacher. While some respondents told us that they found it difficult to choose only four priority areas, the top priority was *reducing class size*. This was followed by
  - improving support for children with special educational needs.
  - increasing the time available for planning and preparation.
  - reducing non-teaching demands (administrative tasks, paperwork).

Teachers had the opportunity to voice some of their own thoughts and views with respect to achieving greater work-life balance. These are just a few of the many insightful comments we heard: (comments remain in their original language)

*Smaller class sizes at all levels will help to deal with the varied ability levels and behavioural issues that are now being seen in the classroom.*

*[Les] classes [sont] trop nombreuses et [il] manque de temps pour corriger et pour donner un appui individualisé aux élèves avec les besoins particuliers.*

*More support for students is ... important, but I believe it goes along with class sizes. If class sizes were smaller, less support would be needed.*



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*Reduce class sizes so teachers can actually manage their classes more effectively, and deliver the curriculum with more authenticity and diversity to the benefit of each child ... it's just common sense!*

*On nous demande un enseignement de qualité qui respecte les styles d'apprentissage de tous les élèves, mais on n'a pas le temps de tout préparer et on n'a pas les ressources humaines pour nous appuyer.*

*I truly believe that increasing teachers' sense of work/life balance will directly and proportionately translate into improved student achievement. Feeling less stressed will increase teachers' ability to be more 'present' and attuned to the current academic and personal needs of their students, and to be able to better address those needs.*

These findings are generally consistent with other research in the area of teacher workload and work-life balance and contribute to the growing body of research in these areas.

### Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions

Teachers are being asked to do more with less. As the authors of the case study of the work-life of Calgary public school teachers state, “studies of teacher workload and work intensification suggest that teachers are facing the toxic combination of an increase in responsibilities and a reduction in the supports and resources they need to meet those responsibilities.” (ATA, 2012, p. 15)

This situation has implications for attracting and retaining teachers to the profession as well as for teachers' physical and mental health and the quality of education.

Linda Duxbury's recommendations on achieving teacher work-life balance may have resonance for other jurisdictions in Canada. She raises some important questions for the future of the teaching profession:

Duxbury does not see gender imbalance [in the teaching profession] as a problem so much as a challenge. School boards need to manage a female-dominated workforce differently. The majority of caregivers for young children and elderly parents are women. As the population ages, eldercare will become an even more important issue. This means that employers will increasingly have to accommodate employees through flexible time and provide them with resources and support .... Now is the time for school boards to review what their policies and practices say about their priorities. Duxbury advises school boards to ask the following questions: Do we value the professional work of teachers? Do we allow flexibility for teachers to deal with aging parents and young children? How will we attract young people to the teaching profession? In turn, educators need to ask themselves: How has technology changed the way we teach? Is this a good change or not? Have we lost sight of the relational space in which real learning takes place? What should learning look like?



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Teachers, much like other Canadians, have become more aware of the necessity of balancing their working lives with their personal lives. They also understand that teachers' conditions of professional practice have an impact on their effectiveness as educators and hence, on their students' learning conditions. It stands to reason that in order to improve the quality of education for all students, including and especially those students with the greatest learning needs, more attention needs to be paid to improving teachers' working conditions.

Gayla Meredith, NWTTA President, notes that:

Like their colleagues in schools across Canada, northern teachers work where their students learn. As such, it stands to reason that teachers' conditions of professional practice impact students' learning environments, and vice versa. It is vital this consideration be included in all discussions as teachers' associations, education departments, policy makers, teachers, parents and the public ask "How can education be improved for our children?" (NWTTA et al., p. 3)

Putting this in a global education reform perspective, Professor Nina Bascia (OISE-UT), an expert on teacher union-government relations, stresses that "it is impossible to disentangle teachers' working conditions from students' opportunities to learn":

In recent years there has been a deterioration of the conditions for teaching worldwide: reduced decision making authority for teachers; greater constraints on curriculum and pedagogy; increased surveillance; work intensification; and the diversion of educational resources from the public to the private sector. Austerity measures reduce the availability of resources for educational policy implementation and for educational practice, particularly for children living in social and economic deprivation.

Teachers are clearly at the centre of most current educational reform efforts, either because the reforms themselves focus on teachers, or because the reform proposals directly impact on their work, and teacher unions are at high alert to respond to teachers' concerns. Teacher unions' longstanding attention to teachers' working conditions are perceived by many outside education as "self-interest," and it is widely believed that if teaching conditions improve, it will be at students' expense in a zero-sum equation.

But that perception is not accurate: *with the deterioration of conditions for teaching comes an equivalent deterioration of the conditions for learning. It is impossible to disentangle teachers' working conditions from students' opportunities to learn. Reduced decision-making authority for teachers and greater constraints on curriculum and pedagogy mean teachers' ability to shape educational delivery to address students' academic needs is constrained. Work intensification for teachers, particularly if it involves greater time spent on administrative tasks, means less time and attention can be paid by teachers to their students.* [emphasis added]

As teacher organizations have long maintained, teachers' working conditions are indeed students' learning conditions.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>ii</sup> See for example the brief summary of Canadian teacher workload studies in *Reflections on Teaching: Teacher Efficacy and the Professional Capital of Alberta Teachers*, Alberta Teachers' Association, April 2014, pp. 9-12.



