

**Stress and Strain in the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union Membership:**

Teachers' Report  
(Executive Summary)

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In December 2009 and January 2010 teachers and school administrators working in public schools across Nova Scotia were contacted by a research team from Saint Mary's University working on behalf of the Nova Scotia Teacher's Union (NSTU) and invited to complete a survey on workplace stress. This report describes the results of the teacher survey.

The teacher survey assessed:

- 1) Work factors that lead to workplace stress for teachers (i.e., workplace stressors)
- 2) Specific responsibilities and work tasks unique to the teaching profession that may contribute to stress
- 3) Types of social support available to teachers to help mitigate the effects of workplace stress
- 4) Various attitudes towards teaching, which can be influenced by the experiences of workplace stress
- 5) Teachers' health and well-being (e.g., experiences of psychological and physical strain)

A total of 879 teachers working in the public school system across Nova Scotia completed the survey, a lower than anticipated response rate. The results reported in this document should thus be interpreted with some caution. The results accurately reflect the attitudes and perceptions of the 879 teachers who completed this survey; however, when making inferences to the population of teachers working in Nova Scotia the results contained in this report are considered accurate within plus or minus 3.1%, 19 times out of 20 (based on a population size estimate of 9000 teachers).

### **Results Summary**

#### **Work Stressors and Attributes**

- Workload was the most frequently noted stressor (79.3%).
- Teachers reported working an average of 54 hours per week, with 13 of those hours being from outside of the regular school time, including their lunch breaks.
- There was a high reported incidence of incivility from school administrators, co-workers, students, and parents. The most common uncivil act was having their judgment questioned.
- Approximately 25% of respondents reported experiencing at least one act of physical violence from students between the months of December 2009 and January 2010.

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- The number of curriculum outcomes that teachers are expected to cover, the number of new initiatives from the department of Education, the School Board, or school administrators, and the individual needs of students were noted by the majority of teachers as prevalent workplace stressors.
- Many teachers included comments about how stressful it was to deal with students' behavioural problems.
- Only about half (52.9%) of working hours are spent on tasks directly related to teaching, half of the sample reported using their designated prep time on non-teaching relevant job activities (e.g. committee work), and half the sample also reported feeling that prep time was allocated unfairly.
- Only a quarter of the sample agreed that their school administrators were transformational leaders.
- Teachers reported good opportunities for skill use in their jobs and involvement in decision making.
- Teachers reported feeling secure in their jobs, but this finding may reflect the fact that the majority of respondents were full-time employees with permanent contracts.

**Health & Well-Being**

- Teachers reported high degrees of social support from co-workers and family/friends.
- The majority of respondents indicated that they sometimes come to work even when they are ill.
- Teachers self-reported moderate levels of strain; however, they inferred higher levels of strain among their coworkers.
- When looking at the relationships among experienced stressors and health factors, work family conflict, role conflict, and job insecurity were consistently associated with poorer health (psychological and physical health symptoms and lower affective well-being). Experiences of mistreatment, particularly incivility from parents, coworkers and administrators and acts of violence from students, were also associated with poorer health.

**Job Attitudes**

- Teachers had largely positive job attitudes. Most reported being satisfied with their jobs overall as well as with their pay and benefits. Most reported low intentions to leave to leave their jobs and approximately half of respondents reported high professional commitment.

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- When looking at the relationships among experienced stressors and job attitudes, work-family conflict, role conflict, and lack of skill use were consistently associated with more negative job attitudes (lower professional commitment, lower job satisfaction, and higher intentions to leave the profession). Experiences of mistreatment, particularly incivility from administrators and acts of violence from students, were also associated with more negative job attitudes.

**Conclusion**

The results of the teacher component of the *Stress and Strain in the NSTU membership survey* suggest that although teachers face some pressing stressors, particularly around workload, incivility and violence (from students), and high demands around curricula and new Board/DOE initiatives, they receive adequate social support from multiple sources, attempt to lead healthy lifestyles, and are largely avoiding the manifestation of psychological and physical strain responses that often result from long term stressor exposure. Similarly, even in the presence of stressors, the teachers hold largely positive job attitudes. That said, exposure to certain stressors, most notably work-family conflict and role conflict are consistently associated with negative job attitudes and poor health outcomes among the respondents. Similarly, experienced mistreatment from parents, administrators, and students are associated with negative job attitudes and poor health outcomes. Recommendations regarding possible steps the NSTU could take to help teachers address some of the noted stressors, including professional development activities, are offered.