



May 14, 2015

Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

and

John Howard, Director
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
395 E St. S.W.
Patriots Plaza 1, Suite 9200
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Duncan and Director Howard:

Every day educators make a difference in the lives of children. The conditions they labor under have a huge impact on their lives and their students' lives. That is why the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), on behalf of the millions of educators working in schools throughout the United States, calls on the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to collaboratively develop and execute a research agenda on the impact these conditions have on the health and well-being of teachers and other school employees. We ask that such a study use reliable intervention research, including a participatory research approach.

Why Is This Necessary?

Teachers and school employees feel under siege. I hear this in school visits, in union halls, on social media. Particularly poignant was a conversation with a group of teachers from the Badass Teachers Association (BATs) in which we talked about how deeply stressed educators are today. During that conversation, we made a commitment to determine how widespread stress, bullying and other quality of work-life factors are, and their effects. We then learned that in the United States, we have never done an in-depth and broad survey or study of the impact of teachers' working conditions and other causes of stress on their health and well-being. Other nations and multinational groups have conducted extensive academic and scientific

American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
AFT Nurses and Health
Professionals

555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202-879-4400
www.aft.org

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Lorretta Johnson
SECRETARY-TREASURER

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The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.



examinations of these concerns and their impact on educators, but not the United States.

In the absence of scientific research, the AFT, with the BATs, launched our own survey. It was developed by rank-and-file teachers working in both union and nonunion work sites in several states. As with any survey instrument built by a committee of passionate and dedicated people, the survey was comprehensive and long. We consulted with an expert in the field of occupational safety and health as well as with a polling company. The voluntary, anonymous survey was launched April 22 and closed on May 1. In that time period, more than 31,000 teachers and other school employees completed our 82-question survey.

The results are troubling, though not surprising to educators themselves. Below are a few of the toplines:

- Nearly half of all respondents say they are no longer as enthusiastic about their profession as when they started.
- Fewer than half of all respondents are in jobs that allow them to make a lot of decisions on their own.
- Among the greatest workplace stressors are the adoption of new initiatives without proper training or professional development, mandated curriculum and standardized tests.
- Only 1 in 5 of the respondents feels valued by government or the media—79 percent disagree that state and federal government officials treat them with respect, and that number is 77 percent for the media.
- Only 14 percent strongly agree with the statement that they trust their administrator/supervisor.
- Seventy-seven percent of respondents say they do not have enough staff to get the work done.
- A total of 97 percent of respondents say they often (73 percent) or sometimes (24 percent) find their work stressful.
- Ninety-six percent of respondents are physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the day.

- Work and family balance is an issue for respondents. Seventy-two percent of respondents do not have time to relax or pursue activities they enjoy, and 87 percent feel the demands of the job interfere with family life.
- Workplace facilities are a big concern. More than half—51 percent—of respondents report that they work in facilities that are only fair or poor.
- Forty-five percent of respondents say time is at such a premium that they do not get adequate breaks to use the restroom.
- Respondents believe a union can help protect their rights; 78 percent strongly agree and 19 percent agree.
- And, despite all this, respondents are sticking with the work they love. Only 14 percent say it is very likely they will seek employment outside of the field of education within the next year.

The more than 31,000 completed surveys provide a rich source of data, and we have only had time to report the topline. In the days and weeks ahead, we will conduct deep analysis of the survey results, including review of the more than 60,000 comments from the 31,000 respondents. We plan to consult with occupational safety and health experts, our members and affiliates, and the BATs. We will share our analysis, but we recognize that this voluntary study cannot replace scientific research conducted by experts. Consider our survey a clarion call for the need for such research to be conducted and funded by the Department of Education and NIOSH.

Why Intervention Research?

Intervention research is a proven and effective methodology to determine safety, health and well-being factors as well as to identify specific interventions that prevent injury, physical and mental strain, and illness. Participatory research is a validated model that actively involves stakeholders in the design and implementation of the research. Such an approach will both build upon the expertise of educators, and inform all parties how best to support teachers and other school personnel in their very tough and important jobs. Further, it will give us actionable research that can be used to



change conditions, which will help us recruit and retain a highly qualified and diverse teaching force in urban systems.

We Can Work Together

Ensuring the physical and mental health equilibrium of teachers and other school personnel could not be more important. Obviously, the support and working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of children. We also can learn from the studies done in other nations. The Whitehall II research done in the United Kingdom (also known as the “Stress and Health Study”), which is in its 30th year, found that British civil service workers in challenging jobs—like teaching—can endure the demands and pressure of their work if they have consistent social support, respect and control of their working conditions. The comprehensive Whitehall study has found that what positively correlates with health and worker output is a voice in workplace decisions, a sense of control over how the work gets done, supportive peers, a culture of respect from management and job security. Certainly, together we can promote school-based environments that provide these conditions.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your staff to present the results of our voluntary survey, to discuss the next steps for building a scientific research study, and to determine how we can meet the immediate and enduring responsibility we all share: to make schools places where teachers want to teach, parents want to send their kids and students want to attend; places where learning is joyous and long-lasting, and where communities are built and supported.

Sincerely,

Randi Weingarten
President, AFT