Here’s How Many Hours a Week Teachers Work

Patrick Jiner teaches 7th grade math at Lake Middle School in Denver, where he logs many extra hours in the evenings and on weekends to plan lessons and respond to parents.
Rachel Woolf for Education Week

It’s not uncommon for teachers to clock in extra hours each day to ensure they meet students’ academic and social-emotional needs. But everything from answering emails to grading papers adds up: A typical teacher works about 54 hours a week—with just under half of that time devoted to directly teaching students, a new survey finds.

The nationally representative survey of more than 1,300 teachers was conducted by the EdWeek Research Center between Jan. 9 and Feb. 23 and commissioned by the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College. It was designed to replace the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, which ran for more than 25 years and ended in 2012.

Teacher dissatisfaction appears to be at an all-time high ,
the survey found, with heavier workloads in part to blame. While teachers have always, to an extent, known that good teaching takes a lot of time, and workloads overall have increased over the years, the pandemic has complicated their schedules even more, say teachers.

In the last two years, they've had to juggle regular teaching duties with covering classes during staffing shortages; preparing for sudden pivots to remote learning; figuring out how to get every student to grade-level learning after interrupted instruction; and supporting students with greater mental health needs.

"In general, teachers work more than 40 hours a week during normal times, and this is anything but normal," said Lynn Holdheide, senior adviser for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at the American Institutes for Research, which provides technical assistance and consultation to states and districts to best support their workforce.

While teachers cited the need for better pay to match the amount of work they put in each week, they also said support systems to help manage their workloads are crucial. It'll take logistical changes such as reworking school calendars and prioritizing the social-emotional needs of both students and teachers, they said.

Teaching involves more work than the general public recognizes

Those who do not work in schools may point out that many other professionals also work more than 40 hours a week, including taking work home with them. Those outside education often make arguments that teachers get summers off.

But if you take a closer look at what actually goes into good teaching, how much time that takes, and how teachers are compensated for that work, you'll find that teachers' work weeks are in many ways just as taxing, if not more so, than in other careers, and that they receive much lower pay and less public respect, Holdheide said.

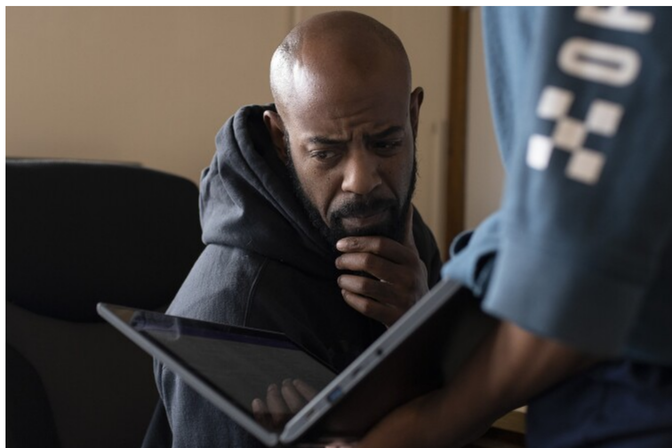
The general public needs to consider that teachers' work doesn't end with the day's final school bell. And it's not just about lecturing at the front of the classroom.

Teachers look at data to assess how students' learning is progressing and where they need to be. They care for the well-being of multiple children at a time. They may not teach in the summer, but they review curriculum, study and understand academic standards, learn about and prepare to use new research-based learning strategies, and more.

"A good teacher is constantly developing and growing and that does take time," Holdheide said.

Yet in the new Merrimack College Teacher Survey, 74 percent of teachers slightly or strongly disagreed that their salary was fair for the work they do.

And 63 percent slightly or strongly disagreed with the idea that they have a lot of control and influence over their schedule such as the classes they teach and non-academic duties they take on, which Holdheide said can contribute to anxiety.



Patrick Jiner, a 7th grade math teacher at Lake Middle School in Denver, said that lesson planning can take up a lot of time that competes with other demands in and out of school such as being able to attend his daughter’s recitals.

If you teach the same grade for multiple years teachers can use lesson plans more than once, he added, but if you’re switching grades or need to cover other classes, regular lesson planning takes up more hours.

And sometimes teachers get overlooked for school leadership positions if they’re unwilling to take on extra work outside of contracted hours, Jiner said.

But very often the extra work is driven by students’ needs. For instance, Jiner had a student get into a fight with their parents and confide in him about it. It took 45 minutes to talk to the student, talk to the parents, and in that particular case, contribute to a police report about the incident. It was an emotionally draining experience after a regular work day.

“As a teacher, you’re more than just a teacher. We’re parents, we’re friends, we’re counselors, and I think we have this drive in us that we just push forward no matter what’s going on,” Jiner said. “And sometimes it’s at the detriment of our own mental health and our own stress.”

The pandemic complicated an already complex workload

If teachers were already noticing heavier workloads over the years, the pandemic exacerbated the challenge of not having enough time to get everything done within set work hours, teachers said.

Karen Lyon, a transitional kindergarten teacher at DeVargas Elementary School in San Jose, Calif., had to make her own lesson plans for remote instruction during the start of the pandemic, but also had to draft instructional guides for parents to be able to help their children learn at home.

At the same time, thanks to the pandemic, students and their families are displaying greater social-emotional needs. Teachers are still processing those changes.

Afia Lewis, a 6th grade math teacher at Ardmore Avenue Elementary School in Lansdowne, Pa., was overseeing younger students recently when a kindergartner pushed another student off a bench. When

Lewis asked why she did that, the student said their peer "tried to share food and it's COVID and it can make me sick so I just tried to get it away from me because I didn't want to die."

In another instance, Lewis was trying to teach an introduction to algebra. When she checked in with her students at the start of the class, one confided they were scared because of the fighting in Ukraine. The student didn't know Ukraine is in Eastern Europe, and far from the United States. So the class briefly veered into a geography lesson and discussion of what the war means for the U.S.

"They have to be able to digest feeling safe first, before they can digest what a variable is," Lewis said.

And that's all emotional work Lewis has to juggle with addressing her own daughter's needs.

Shifts between remote and in-person learning and the lack of substitutes to cover for teacher vacancies took away crucial hours needed for lesson planning, one of the things teachers wish they had more time for. And when teachers took time off for illness or other reasons, leaving another teacher to switch gears, it often led to feelings of guilt.

"I developed a sinus infection early in the year, and could not come in until I had a negative COVID test," said Lyon. "And I felt horrible about it."

Support for teachers involves logistical changes

While teachers hope for more pay that fully takes into account the labor they perform each day and week, they argue that there are also strategies that can be put in place to help manage all the responsibilities that can't be shrugged away.

Lyon from California once had access to support teachers in the district who would go to different schools to model lessons and share lesson plans and ideas for how to teach specific classes. That helped to shave time off teachers' prep work in a collaborative way. But thanks to budget cuts, she said, that support and time for collaboration has ended.

"We need to have the time to collaborate so that we could brainstorm off of each other and develop lessons," Lyon said.

The Lewis and Clark Montessori public school in Damascus, Ore., switched to a four-day school week this school year, said middle school teacher Caitlin Spanjer. So while the workload hasn't gone down, it's more manageable because of the time Spanjer has on Fridays to get it all done, including handling parent and professional development emails, lesson planning, and more.

In the five-day workweek, if Spanjer attends a six-hour professional-development training on a Saturday, her weekend is cut short without giving her time to either rest or catch up on work for the week ahead. In a four-day workweek, attending that training feels more manageable.

Jiner, the Colorado teacher, has seen success in time management after his school leadership fought for the school to have its own calendar separate from the district. That gives the school leaders agency to set specific days off that work for their staff.

"That gives us extra hours of planning time that we would not normally have if we were following the district's calendar," he said.

Still, as national conversations around teacher pay continue, Holdheide, of the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, said there's an opportunity to take lessons learned from the pandemic and act on them.

That means administrators rethink what they are asking teachers to do on a daily basis and what student expectations are. It means looking at whether there are opportunities to leverage remote learning to bring in a specialized teacher for virtual classes in rural areas where otherwise it may be harder to hire; it means asking the broader school community whether school hours and days should shift.

“We’ve been talking about re-envisioning the way education K-12 is happening,” she said. “Maybe this is just the push that will finally get us over the edge to make some of these changes we’ve talked about.”