

## Transforming the Culture of Education Improving Teacher Working Conditions



### About the documentary

Teachers are more likely to stay in the teaching profession when they feel satisfied with their job, which can lead to improved student outcomes.<sup>1</sup> REL Midwest created a 30-minute documentary in collaboration with Detroit Public Television to explore how districts and schools can create supportive working environments for teachers. This documentary is a product of the REL [Midwest Alliance to Improve Teacher Preparation](#), which is dedicated to improving student access to high-quality teachers across Michigan.

Teacher working conditions are defined as school environmental factors that influence teacher job satisfaction. This documentary focuses on three elements of teacher working conditions: Leading Schools to Success, Empowering Teachers Through Leadership, and Creating Meaningful Professional Development, as described in table 1.

*At the end of the day, the district is only as good as it's able to develop teachers and leaders who can address the demands of the profession. People need to feel celebrated. They need to feel supported. But they need to be able to have a skill set that allows them to function effectively in a space. If you are continually helping people to grow, you are going to see great things.*

– Dr. Derrick Coleman, Superintendent,  
River Rouge School District

**Table 1. Three elements of teacher working conditions highlighted in the documentary and best practices used to address these elements**

<p><b>Leading Schools to Success</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ School leaders work with teachers to improve instructional practice.</li> <li>▪ School leaders review data with teachers and discuss how to help students who need support.</li> <li>▪ School leaders set a vision and implement strategies to support the vision.</li> <li>▪ School leaders establish a school culture and climate where teachers feel safe.</li> <li>▪ School leaders promote transparency.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Empowering Teachers Through Leadership</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teachers have autonomy to make decisions.</li> <li>▪ Teachers learn from other teachers.</li> <li>▪ Teacher leaders provide support to other teachers.</li> <li>▪ School leaders recruit teacher leaders.</li> <li>▪ Teacher leaders promote best practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Creating Meaningful Professional Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Schools offer job-embedded professional development to teachers.</li> <li>▪ Schools offer professional development that is aligned with what works and sustains learning.</li> <li>▪ Schools offer professional development that is applicable to the classroom and supports student success.</li> <li>▪ Schools offer opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers.</li> <li>▪ Schools involve teachers in determining what professional development to offer.</li> </ul>

**WATCH THE DOCUMENTARY:** <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/videos/transforming-culture-of-education.aspx>

<sup>1</sup> Banerjee, N., Stearns, E., Moller, S., & Mickelson, R. A. (2017). Teacher job satisfaction and student achievement: The roles of teacher professional community and teacher collaboration in schools. *American Journal of Education*, 123(2), 203–241. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1129364>; Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4–36.

In the documentary, researchers Natalya Gnedko-Berry, PhD, REL Midwest; Matthew Clifford, PhD, American Institutes for Research; and Courtney Rowland, PhD, American Institutes for Research, discuss the research on teacher working conditions and the vital role of school leaders. The researchers focus their discussion on the three elements of teacher working conditions described in the table above as well as on the importance of other fundamental working conditions, such as having well-equipped and safe school facilities. In addition, Lucy Steiner, senior vice president of professional learning and leadership at Public Impact, describes how schools and districts can improve their teacher leadership systems to ensure that teachers and students are supported. The program also features the perspectives of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers from Grant Public Schools and River Rouge School District in Michigan.



## Intended audience

REL Midwest created this documentary as a tool for school and district leaders to use when they engage in strategic planning, principal coaching sessions, and other activities related to teacher recruitment and retention. While the documentary focuses on examples from Michigan, the best practices and strategies shared are relevant for educators across the country. REL Midwest suggests individuals watch the program and use the following questions as a starting point for a discussion on how a school or district can create supportive working conditions for their teachers.

## Discussion questions

- How would you apply the strategies highlighted in the documentary to cultivate high-quality working environments for teachers in your school or district?
- How have you seen schools and districts create supportive teacher working conditions in your community? What types of professional development and leadership opportunities do they offer for teachers?
- If you were part of an effort to improve teacher working conditions within your school or district, whom would you involve in those conversations? What steps would you and others need to take to translate those discussions into actions?
- What challenges do you see in creating supportive working conditions for teachers, and what are possible ways to overcome these challenges?
- How do the strategies shown in the documentary align with goals of your school and/or district? How can school and district leaders incorporate these strategies into their strategic planning?

## About REL Midwest

REL Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. REL Midwest works in partnership with practitioners in seven Midwest states to conduct applied research and provide training, coaching, and technical support to create a more evidence-based education system. To learn more, visit the [REL Midwest website](#) and follow [@RELMidwest on Twitter](#).