

The Real Problem With Teaching in North Carolina

It isn't the pay, it's the hours

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Note: This is the first in a three-part series on teaching conditions. Part II will look at the teacher evaluation system and Part III will consider solutions.



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My husband and I are both teachers. Recently, I suggested to him that we should only work the hours we are paid to make a point. His response was, "But, you can't." You would not get the job done. So I asked him why we couldn't at least do it for a short time as a demonstration. He said the public would have no sympathy for teachers complaining about having to work too much. They would only have sympathy for something they saw as affecting the well being of students. Okay...

It is not in the best interest of students for good teachers to leave the profession. For talented young teachers, like one who was nominated for Teacher of the Year at Leesville Road High School this year, to leave for the private sector. When she was explaining her decision to not come back next year, the first words out of her mouth were, "I am just so tired, all the time."

Students are also affected when experienced teachers like me get stretched so thin with non-instructional responsibilities that they become both physically and mentally exhausted. I love teaching and want to invest time in doing what is best for my students and my school, but I am going to get burned out if something doesn't change. We are losing more and more teachers every year who are switching to other professions, retiring early, going to other states or countries to teach, or choosing not to return once they start a family.

I am now going to tell you two stories that illustrate the nature of teacher hours in North Carolina.

Teachers have to make up every hour lost to inclement weather. Unless you drove to school and worked in the building, you have to account for "lost" time. We have a total of 72.5 hours to account for this semester in Wake County. To see if we need to use any leave days, we make a chart of all the extra hours we have worked to see if we are in the negative. To date, I have worked 125 hours that would qualify because they occurred at school and I do not get salary or stipend for those activities. When I include everything I have scheduled through the end of the year, it totals 16.5 full days of extra time I have spent at school.

But the most basic parts of my job – grading papers for almost 90 students, creating instructional materials for two curriculums, writing quizzes and tests, emailing parents and counselors, and planning field trips – most often are done on my own time at home. My non-instructional school hours are taken up with covering duties, offering tutoring and re-tests, attending meetings, getting copies made, checking messages, entering grades, and setting up my classroom. I have to work through lunch, stay late, and take work home on a regular basis. When I look at the actual time I have spent working per week over the course of this year – it is approximately 56 hours or 2 days of unpaid overtime *every week*.

The fact that the school system is worried about some teachers “cheating” them out of money for those snow days is not only ridiculous but also insulting.

When I was preparing to go on maternity leave for my youngest, I worked for free for almost a month during the summer to convert my classes to the new curriculum and write out plans for my substitute. Legally, you are not required to do this. But in the schools, you are reminded that if you don’t do your job it will fall to other overworked teachers to do it for you, so...I continued to work nights and weekends and I still needed help from other teachers when the baby arrived. They did not get any extra pay or comp time, and I actually *lost pay* because I ran out of leave days. Even so, I still continued to consult with my substitute on a regular basis and occasionally came to school to get papers to grade, for free.

How did I run out of leave? I had used my allotted sick days during my first few years of teaching, during which I spent much of the time on the couch doing schoolwork. Some teachers, not naming names, even occasionally stay home just to be able to grade and plan all day. Other teachers come to school even when they are sick because they can’t fall behind. Many dedicated teachers sacrifice both their time and their health for their students.

I now have a two-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. This extra time that I devote to teaching is coming at a real cost to my family. About once every few weeks, I crash right after dinner – and once I actually nodded off sitting upright at the table. Quite literally a “wake-up” call for me. Why, when I regularly work overtime without any form of compensation, do I buy into this message that I am still not doing enough?

I don’t just feel tired anymore, I feel exploited.