March 2008

Teacher Perceptions of the Funding Crisis in Oregon Public Schools: Policy Issues

LeoNora M. Cohen  
*Oregon State University*

Jennifer Dixon  
*Oregon State University*

Gregory Sampson-Gruener  
*Oregon State University*

Donna Shaw  
*Oregon State University*

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte)

Part of the [Education Commons](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte)

**Recommended Citation**

DOI: 10.15760/nwjte.2008.6.1.5

Available at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte/vol6/iss1/5](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte/vol6/iss1/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Northwest Journal of Teacher Education by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
Teacher Perceptions of the Funding Crisis in Oregon Public Schools: Policy Issues

LeoNora M. Cohen, Jennifer Dixon, Jan Mills, Gregory Sampson-Gruener, Donna Shaw, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon

Abstract

During spring 2003 Oregon endured the worst school budget crisis in the nation. To understand teacher experiences during this period, 90 teachers across the state were interviewed. Questions focused on teacher attitudes, personal/financial issues, working conditions, and changes in teaching, analyzed with simple statistics and qualitative descriptive methods. Teacher satisfaction declined; teachers were pessimistic about schools, angry about salary freezes, and wanted to retire immediately. Most expressed frustration with politics and dissatisfaction with working conditions. Almost all experienced salary loss, even when days were not cut. Teachers made many personal sacrifices and most experienced health problems. Working condition changes included class size increases, loss of specialists, longer working hours, and more special needs students with less help. Teaching changed to “no frills.” Loss of materials, supplies, time with students, and morale problems were common. Stable and adequate funding and teacher working conditions have not been addressed in policy.

Introduction

In 2003 during a national economic recession, Oregon schools experienced a school funding crisis “worse than any other state in the nation” (Conley & Picus, 2003, p. 595). “The 6.1% decline in Oregon’s K-12 funding per student between 2002 and 2003 was the largest annual percentage decline measured by any state... and second largest decline...since 1989-90” (Oregon School Funding Defense Foundation, 2006, para. 6). Policies that led to this disaster for Oregon schools have not changed. Oregon still lacks a stable school funding policy, having only two legs of the needed “three legged stool,” state income taxes and local property taxes. Oregon is one of only five states with no state sales tax (United States Sales Tax Site, 2007). It is one of the few states that has no rainy day fund (Thompson & Green, 2004). However, school funding problems are not limited to Oregon and are likely to reoccur due to the cyclical nature of economic business (Gates & Thompson, 2005), unless funding policies are changed.

Prior to the funding crisis, the groundwork for disaster was in place. In 1990, Initiative Measure 5 limited the amount of property taxes schools, educational service districts, and community colleges could collect on individual property to $5 per $1,000 assessed value. At that time, approximately 67% of funding for public schools came from local property taxes.
and 25.5% came from the State Basic School Support Fund, which came primarily from state income taxes (Oregon Department of Education, 2002). A consequence of Measure 5 was that “housing prices jumped and so did their assessments, while commercial assessments were largely unaffected, causing a substantial but probably unintended shift in the burden of the property tax from commercial property owners to homeowners” (Thompson & Green, 2004, p. 5). As a result, Initiative Measures 47 and 50 followed in 1996 and 1997, rolling back property assessments to 1995-96 levels and limiting future assessed value growth to 3% per year. These measures also required a double majority of voters to approve any tax increases, virtually ensuring the impossibility of raising property taxes to support schools (League of Women Voters, 1999; Oregon School Boards Association, 2003a). The net result was a major shift away from local property taxes, to approximately 70% funding of school operating expenses by the state general funds, largely through state income taxes, with the remainder from lottery and other funds (Oregon Department of Education, 2002). Oregon’s dependence on a fluctuating state income tax for the bulk of school funding, precipitous declines in interest rates in the value of state and personal investments, the drop in taxes paid by corporations in this state, a “kicker” rebate paid to taxpayers anytime a surplus is collected, lack of a sales tax, as well as numerous tax loopholes led to the instability and the need to find alternative, stable sources of funding (Oregon Revenue Coalition, 2003; Register Guard, 2003).

Litigation to provide adequate, equalized school funding failed four times (National School Boards Association, 2004), which led to the establishment of the Quality Education Commission (QEC) in 1999. The findings by this bipartisan commission provided a framework for analyzing funding decisions through the Oregon Quality Education Model (OQEM), an adequacy model based on funding needed, as judged by experts, to meet performance proficiency standards for prototypical schools (Conley & Picus, 2003). A baseline budget of $6 billion was required in 2000 to appropriately fund schools in order to ensure the required educational outcomes, according to OQEM. Voters approved an amendment requiring the Legislature to provide adequate and equitable funding for schools in 2000 (Oregon School Boards Association, 2007).

However, the state budget plan was derailed during the economic downturn. Members of the legislature did not fix the long-term school funding problems and did not even provide the amount needed to hold schools harmless, choosing instead to increase state income taxes temporarily for three years (Oregon Education Association, 2003). In response, voters rejected the increase in a referendum in February 2004, further complicating school budgets. Funds allocated for the respective school years were 4.31 billion 2002-2003, 4.38 billion for the 2003-2004, 4.37 billion for 2004-2005, and 4.7 billion for 2005-2006 (Oregon Department of Education, 2007b), far below the amount required by the QEC for adequately addressing educational outcomes. For 2006-2007, QEM funding should have been $7.1 billion (Silverman, 2006). Funding for the 2007-2008 school year increased to $6.245 billion from the state, although unevenly distributed and still inadequate (Carter, 2007). The basic policy problem, funding instability, persists.

Sponsored by several Oregon foundations, The Chalkboard Project attempted to take a comprehensive, independent look at Oregon’s public schools. Through town meetings around the state, several ideas were proposed to ensure reliable funding and to satisfy the concerns that taxpayer dollars are not wasted (Oregon School Boards Association, 2003). Similar to what has happened in 39 other states (Silverman, 2006), an Oregon school funding case against the state...
and legislative leaders was filed on March 21, 2006 by six school districts and three parents. The case is based on the state’s constitutional requirement to provide funding “sufficient to ensure that the state’s system of K-12 public education meets the quality goals established by law” (Oregon School Funding Defense Foundation, 2006, para.2). The suit asked the court to declare the current funding system unconstitutional (Angeli, 2007). Although the outcome is still pending, it remains to be seen whether any benefits will accrue to schools from these efforts.

Fiscal instability, along with Oregon’s high standards for teachers and students, school reform and restructuring, a considerable increase in special needs and English language learners, high costs for teacher training, the enormous impact of NCLB along with accountability (such as school report cards) and public humiliation for schools that fail to meet AYP, a then failing retirement system (PERS), rapid policy changes affecting educators, and lack of a budget cushion have made for a continuing disaster in Oregon’s public schools. Oregon became known as “the Mississippi of the West,” for its failure to support schools (Herbert, 2003).

Research Problem and Questions

Given the extremely serious instability of educational funding in this state and its visibility nationwide, with 90 districts cutting days of schooling during spring, 2003 (even Gary Trudeau depicted the plight of Oregon schools in a series of Doonesbury comic strips!), we conducted a study of teacher perceptions of the funding crisis in Oregon public schools. Teachers are affected by the economic storms that buffet schools, yet their voices have been lacking on this topic, and teachers’ concerns have been ignored. A part of a larger research project, the purpose of this study was to find out about teachers’ attitudes, personal and financial issues, working conditions, and changes in classroom practice that resulted from the funding crisis in 2003. We conducted interviews with several items that related to each of the following research questions:

- What were teacher attitudes about their job satisfaction and what factors may affect their attitudes?
- What were the personal and financial issues teachers faced during the budget crisis?
- How did classroom and working conditions change because of the budget crisis?
- What changes did teachers make in their teaching during the budget crisis?

Literature Review

To understand the effects of the crisis on teachers, we looked for studies that linked the effects of school budget shortfalls on teachers. We found no current studies done in the past 15 years that connect these topics. A handful of earlier studies, largely from the 1980s, suggested that budget cuts and statewide measures, such as Proposition 13 in California and Proposition 2 ½ in Massachusetts, were deeply stressing to teachers (within the top 3 stressors). Teachers felt abandoned by legislators, and the public and teacher morale and sense of security was seriously affected, with many teachers planning to leave the profession (Calfee & Pessirilo-Jurasic, 1980; Francis, 1991; Ginsberg, Schwartz, Olson, & Bennett, 1987; Schwartz, Olson, Ginsberg, & Bennett, 1983; Shiman, 1983).

We therefore explored the research on teacher satisfaction, morale, and climate relative to burnout and attrition. We also explored economic policy related to these topics and to the broader economic picture. Lowered teacher morale, burnout, and attrition are likely
byproducts of recent funding instability.

Teacher Satisfaction, Morale, and Climate Related to Burnout and Attrition

Teacher satisfaction, morale, and climate have been linked to prevention of burnout and attrition, as well as student success (Matier, 2007). Organizational theory includes several proposed models to explain the relationships between the individual and his or her employing organizations. Both the POF (person-organization fit) framework (Chatman, 1989; O’Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991) and the ASA (attraction-selection-attrition) model (Schneider, 1987) make predictions on outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, attrition and job performance indicators based upon the degree of compatibility between characteristics of the individual and the climate and culture of the organization. Nationwide, 87% of teachers were found to be very or somewhat satisfied with teaching as a career (Metlife, 2003), indicating a match between teachers and organization. But the Oregon school funding crisis speaks to dissonance between the values of teachers and school culture, which focus on students and learning, and those of the greater employing organization, namely the general public and state legislature, where the values shift to protecting one’s pocketbook.

Burnout

Teachers are supposed to have “adaptive expertise,” a capacity for growth related to promoting their students’ learning (Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2003). However, the impact of the array of rapid changes and forces, along with the enormity of the budget crisis made adaptation for teachers difficult at best and led to lowered morale, burnout and attrition. Burnout is described among human service professionals, especially teachers, from three perspectives: psychological, existential, or sociological. As a psychological syndrome, individuals become emotionally exhausted and lose their sense of purpose or accomplishment and their ability to cope (Dworkin, 2001). From this perspective, burnout involves three central dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (wherein the person detaches from and may become negative or callous to persons under his or her care), and reduced personal accomplishment in relation to job performance (Cherniss, 1980a, 1980b; Maslach, 1993; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A second perspective views burnout as an existential crisis that comes out of a sense of meaninglessness, when work is incorporated into self-image (Pines, 1993). When individuals feel devalued in their work their reflections lead to self-doubt and diminishment of self-worth, leading to a crisis of existence. A third perspective is sociological, viewing burnout as a form of alienation, having organizational and structural roots, rather than the individual’s inability to cope with stresses. Dimensions from this view include powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and estrangement (Dworkin, 2001).

Burnout most commonly occurs among teachers in schools in large urban settings characterized by overcrowded classrooms; highly bureaucratic systems; physically run down or dirty facilities; and a lack of staff and equipment, social support among teachers, and administrative support for teachers’ efforts. Other factors are low teacher salaries, disruptive student behaviors, time constraints, feelings of isolation, a shortage of resources, negative images of the profession, multiplicity of teacher roles, lack of public support, involuntary transfers, too rapid policy changes, high-stakes accountability and sanctions, and demanding parents (Brouwers & Tonic, 2000; Brunetti, 2006; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Konanc, 1996; Perie & Baker, 1997, Valli & Buese, 2007). Individuals who are particularly prone to burnout
include males under 40 teaching in middle or senior high schools, individuals who are idealistic or passionate about their work, those with an external locus of control and a greater sense of the stressors teachers experience, and individuals with weak self-efficacy beliefs (Farber, 2000; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). These three perspectives, particularly the sociological and the conditions for burnout, are evident in the Oregon context. Attrition is often a result.

Attribution

The reasons for teacher attrition mirror the grounds for burnout syndrome (Scherer, 2003). “Retaining teachers is a far larger problem than training new ones—and a key to solving teacher shortages” (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003, p. 7). In Oregon, between 1990 and 2001, the average attrition rate during the first five years of teaching was 37% (national rates of attrition were between 30-50% in the first five years) (Ankeny & Zanville, 2002). The most frequently cited reasons inexperienced teachers gave for leaving Oregon schools were all related to workplace issues: high demands of teaching, little planning time or time to help students, lack of support by school administrators, and the rigorous requirements made of teachers. According to Zanville (2006), the overall Oregon teacher attrition rate for 2002-2003 was 9.5% during the height of the budget crisis, compared to 7.1% in 2005-2006 when the school picture improved (national attrition rates are 7-8%).

In Ingersoll’s (2001) study of 6,733 teachers in 1991-1992, retirement was not found to be the major reason for the 42% of beginning teachers leaving the profession. Rather, the greatest causes were job dissatisfaction and leaving to pursue other jobs. Reasons for job dissatisfaction include inadequate administrative support, poor salary, student discipline issues, unmotivated students, lack of time, lack of community support, lack of influence over decision making, and “school staffing cutbacks due to lay-offs, school closings, and reorganizations [which] account for a larger proportion of turnover . . . than does retirement” (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 22). In addition, Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) found that an unintended consequence of NCLB and the new accountability stigmatizes low performing schools, “affecting staff morale and leading to a teacher exodus” (p. 35).

Induction programs that provide support for beginning teachers have been recommended as one solution to attrition (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). However, unless school policies deal with how schools are managed and how teachers are treated, the attrition trend will likely continue, according to Ingersoll (2001), who called for studies that look into the impact of teacher turnover on school performance and school community. Ingersoll and Smith (2003) and Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) suggested that although raising salaries, especially for beginning teachers, may be an incentive to stay, improving the working conditions is probably a more effective focus in retaining teachers. Our study focused on teacher perceptions of the school funding crisis effects on their classrooms, working conditions, and their lives.

Policy Regarding Economic Effects

Spending on public education has major economic impact on the state (and others), more so in rural areas. Public schools in Oregon are one of the largest employers, with 56,000 employees in 2000-2001. In that year, “about 107,000 jobs and $3.93 billion in personal income [were] directly or indirectly related to school spending. Put another way, every 10 jobs in K-12 education support nine other jobs, many in the service, finance, real estate and construction sectors” with additional monies from districts and employees for supplies, materials, and
taxes paid to the state (Oregon School Boards Association, 2003, para 7). Cuts and attrition in education depress other areas of the economy. For example, the statewide loss in number of teachers (397) and schools (23) between the 2001-2003 school years impacted Oregon's economy (Oregon Department of Education, 2002; 2007a). According to Angeli (2006, p. 491), "Years of inadequate funding have severely diminished the quality of K-12 public education in Oregon," based on assessment results, meeting of standards, high school graduation rates, and overcrowded classrooms. He noted the year 2000 average elementary class size was 23.9, 49th in the nation, a figure that worsened during the 2002-2003 school budget crisis year. Yet lack of support for school funding continues. A spike in the number of teachers leaving the profession occurred especially in 2004 (Zanville, 2006), inevitably costing the state even more.

Not only are there economic costs to the state, but effective teachers have a huge impact on student learning and are the most important factor influencing achievement gains, a bigger influence than race, poverty, or parent education (Carey, 2004). There is a strong relationship between teacher satisfaction, working conditions, and teacher retention as well as student learning (The Southwest Center for Teaching Quality, 2004, a, b). Under such crisis conditions, teacher effectiveness is diminished.

Methodology

The greatest upheaval occurred in spring term of the 2002-2003 school year when state revenues plummeted far below predicted levels, forcing 90 of the 198 Oregon school districts to cut days from the nation's shortest school year (177 days) during the last three months of the school calendar. This study was undertaken with urgency and without funding because of the magnitude of the crisis. Five masters students in a spring term 2003 foundations of education course helped to design an interview questionnaire, pilot it, gather data, and do preliminary data entry and investigation. An additional seven students helped in the interviewing. The Oregon Education Association (OEA) and the Confederation of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) forwarded the information to their membership as well. We had 11 weeks to develop the questionnaires, prepare informed consent materials, secure IRB training for students, get IRB approval, collect the data during the budget crisis, and begin the data analysis. Students fanned out across the state in schools where they had either student taught or attended. Principal permission was secured and students conducted 65 interviews. From COSA and OEA,
an additional 25 participants responded to the questionnaire via e-mail or hardcopy, totaling 90 respondents.

The questionnaire consisted of four demographic, seven ranked (with one asking for explanation), eight short answer, and five long answer questions for a total of 23 questions, several having multiple parts. Analysis involved simple statistics and correlations as well as descriptive analysis for the qualitative aspects.

Limitations and Data Sources

Due to time constraints, a convenience sample was utilized and districts were chosen for the purpose of doing exploratory research. It is unknown if the sample selected is a representative one. However, demographics of respondents compared to 100% Oregon Department of Education teacher demographics for the same year, 2002-2003, suggested that the sample is fairly representative with the exceptions of a higher proportion of teachers in our study with masters degrees, more senior high, and fewer middle-level teachers (Oregon Department of Education, 2007a).

Respondents came from 21 districts representing most of the geographic regions and population distributions of Oregon. There were 29 schools represented, 11 elementary, 5 middle, and 13 high schools. School size generally reflected the age level taught and ranged from just over 200 to almost 2,400. District size ranged from just over 1,000 to 47,000 students, representing rural, small towns and cities, suburban, and metropolitan areas in Oregon. The largest number of respondents (74.4%) was in the Willamette Valley corridor where the largest population also resides (70% in 2000, according to the Register Guard, 2000).

Analysis

In order to understand the distribution of the measured data, descriptive statistics were employed. The questions were analyzed with a popular test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality) to determine goodness of fit. None of the data presented in a normally distributing fashion which is consistent with the fact that the data was sampled by a non-scientific method. Thus, inferential statistics were ruled out for possible analysis. The ranked data was analyzed using measures of central tendency, frequency distributions, and item correlations (see Tables 1 and 2). In addition, qualitative analysis was done for short and long answer questions, coding and recoding responses to arrive at themes and using teacher words to capture feelings and concerns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Achieve 5 yrs ago</th>
<th>Achieve Now</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Retire Now</th>
<th>Satisfied Now</th>
<th>Satisfied 5 yrs ago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.6067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>7.6075</td>
<td>8.7625</td>
<td>7.5747</td>
<td>7.6974</td>
<td>3.9222</td>
<td>2.7792</td>
<td>6.9620</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1: What are teacher attitudes about their job satisfaction and what factors may affect their attitudes?
Results

Results of the study focused on four research questions: attitudes, personal and financial issues, classroom and working conditions, and changes in teaching. Overall, there was a high response rate on each item. Descriptive measures are reported for each ranking question. Ranking questions assume a ten-point scale (10 being highest) (See Table 1).

Research Question 1: What are teacher attitudes about their job satisfaction and what factors may affect their attitudes?

Teachers were asked to rank how much they enjoy teaching now (mean = 7.61), compared to their enjoyment of teaching five years ago (mean = 8.76). This change suggests that teachers' perceived enjoyment of teaching had diminished during the budget crisis.

Teachers ranked student achievement today and five years ago as similar (mean = 7.57 currently; mean = 7.70 five years prior). This suggests that despite overall negative working conditions, teachers continued to focus on student learning. There was not a negative correlation between student achievement rankings between the years (see Table 2).

Teachers ranked their optimism about Oregon schools as a mean of 3.92, indicating that they were not positive about the direction that Oregon schools were taking. The optimism question appeared to interact with general job satisfaction (r = .363 at the 0.01 significance level) and student achievement (r = .282 at the 0.01 significance level; see Table 2). Put simply, the more teachers expressed optimism, the more likely they were to note increased job satisfaction and student performance.

Because salaries for teachers were frozen, teachers ranked their feelings about the fairness of this freeze at 2.77. This was largely due to the salaries being affected despite contractual and other guarantees. The salary fairness question had no significant interactions with the other questions or responses.

There was a notable correlation between teacher satisfaction (Q4) and teacher rankings of student achievement (Q6). This indicates that teachers were more satisfied, despite budget cut-backs, when they perceived high student achievement. Previous satisfaction was also found to positively correlate with previous student achievement. Additionally, teacher satisfaction highly corresponded to optimism toward future conditions in schools. Importantly, there was a direct negative correlation between current satisfaction and the desire to retire immediately. Another finding revealed that as teachers were more likely to rank satisfaction higher five years ago, they were more likely to indicate a desire to retire and leave the classroom. However, the correlation is low and may be attributed to a sample bias. Current satisfaction was not linked to a desire to retire and, as mentioned above, was directly linked to a non-desire to immediately retire.

Question 10 asked teachers to rank If you could retire now, would you? Generally, teachers indicated they would retire as indicated by the median and mode scores that were above 7.0, with 49 of 79 respondents indicating a 7.0 or higher on a desire to retire immediately. The results were highly skewed, with 43% ranking it 10 and 15% ranking it 1 (see Figure 1). Those who did not want to retire now were either new to the profession or "just love teaching!" Most who ranked their desire to retire as 10 had much to say about their working conditions and the budget woes, such as, "I can't take the cuts—more work, less pay—mandates have to be met with..."
fewer days to teach and larger classes.” Some commented on politics: “Politics and pressure on teachers get to me.” Only three discussed their age as a factor and the correlation of age with desire to retire was low, suggesting that teachers across experience levels wanted to leave teaching.

One hypothesized explanation for the budget cuts was use of volunteers and voluntary contributions in schools, which were thought to ease the need for more funding. We therefore asked respondents a three-part question about volunteers: In part 1, Do you have parents or other volunteers in your classroom (yes, no, 89/90), there were more volunteers at the elementary level, 52 of the respondents used volunteers in the classroom, while 37 did not.

In part 2, Are parents (others) contributing either monetarily, or with their time more or less than in past years? (71/90), 41 said more, 22 said less, 6 said the same, one said unknown, one said both more and less, and 19 did not respond. One respondent noted that “we try to get volunteers, but we can’t really get any.” In part 3, Do you feel volunteerism is intentionally leading to budget cuts (yes, no, explain), 65 said no, 18 said yes, and 7 did not respond. Only 20 explained their answers, but those who responded “yes” gave three messages: The first was that some schools are “raising money to fund certain positions, through fundraisers by volunteers.” The largest number of responses suggested that the district classroom, it paints an inaccurate picture to the public.” A final response to whether teachers think volunteers are leading to budget cuts was, “I hope not!”

Surprisingly, when asked (87/90), If given the opportunity to teach anywhere in the U.S., would you currently consider teaching in Oregon?, 59.8% responded that they would still want to teach in this state, while 40.2% indicated that they would choose to teach elsewhere. Most of explanations for not considering leaving Oregon were their love for this state, roots, and family ties. Most who would prefer to teach elsewhere emphasized budget problems and instability, feeling unsupported and undervalued, facing further cuts, increases in class size, and retirement concerns. “The future is too bleak, the funding is too questionable, the retirement outlook is poor, and the value put on teachers in this state is embarrassing. I don’t feel valued and appreciated for the job I do by the state.”

The final question on the interview was, Is
there anything else you would like to share about the Oregon school budget situation? Although 23 out of 90 respondents did not respond or answered no to this question, the rest provided responses, some extensive. Their biggest concern was frustration with politics (30 responses). In this group, eight voiced concerns for children: “I wish the decision-makers could go on-site to schools in Oregon to view actual problems due to budget cuts. Our children are our future.” Another eight vented frustration at legislators and the state: “Our legislators have failed the kids in our state miserably and they have done it at the expense of teachers’ pensions.” Many expressed outrage about the political situation, “It’s disappointing and ridiculous!” Three in this frustrated group voiced, “I’m scared there is a strong political force in Oregon to crush public education. Public education is the keystone of American society!” Sixteen respondents called for finding funding solutions, asking the state to “find stable funding now!” “fix it,” and “make education a priority. It keeps businesses in Oregon and brings in others. If they want to get out of recession, having schools helps.” Thirteen expressed frustration for teachers and schools: “Teachers are being asked to just work harder and work with less to fill in the gap. We were maxed out 5 years ago. There’s no excess energy to contribute.” They talked about problems in planning for next year with so many unknowns, feeling disrespected, frustration with the public, stress at having to pick up the slack, anger with loss of retirement benefits, and sad for students.

Research Question 2: What are the personal and financial issues teachers faced during the budget crisis?

Teachers (89/90) were asked, How many days were removed from your contract? The mean was 5.92, with a range of 0 to 23 days. These were “cut days” for which teachers did not get paid. Respondents (89/90) were asked, Has your salary been affected by budget cuts?, with 91% saying yes and 9% no. Some who did not have days cut from their contracts responded affirmatively, with comments such as, “I have paid for more materials this year... file folders, glue sticks, etc. We haven’t had a real raise in years.”

Teachers (82/90) were asked, How have you accommodated for salary changes? The vast majority of the respondents had to do major belt tightening, with 28% of the teachers or their partners getting second jobs or looking for them. Almost all described some level of personal sacrifice and doing without: “I cut back at home with spending, borrowed money from family, and my husband works extra;” “I feed the kids less, go out less, etc.” and “We eat oatmeal.” Several respondents also mentioned spending less in the classroom, on charity, or on professional development.

In answer to the question, Do you think your health has been affected by the budget crisis? (89/90), 73% responded yes, 25% said no, and 2% said both yes and no. Those who explained why health was not affected gave personality or religious explanations. Of those with health problems, stress was described by over two-thirds as a concern, “Stress! It’s the constant worry of not knowing what is going to happen with funding and our teaching conditions. Seeing colleagues lose their jobs.” Over a third of the “yes” group described emotional problems, such as depression, anxiety, worry, and being on “an emotional roller coaster.” I’m tense, emotional, easier to panic, forget more, on the edge of tears because I cannot accomplish what I know my students need.” Another third described being exhausted or not being able to sleep. Eighteen described physical problems, such as illness, high blood pressure, migraines and headaches, stomachaches, serious asthma and allergies, and eating disorders. Over half described multiple health problems, such as,
“Loss of sleep, weight gain, a ‘don’t give a rip’ attitude, depression, and high stress level.”

Research Question 3: How have classroom and working conditions changed because of the budget crisis?

Teachers (84/90) were asked about schoolwork beyond the school week with the question, About how many hours per week do you work on schoolwork (weekends, evenings, etc., beyond the 40 hour week)? The mean number of hours worked outside the classroom was 10.63, so the average teacher in this sample invested over 50 hours per week on teaching tasks.

Class size was a concern, with four sub-questions on this topic. For this group of respondents (86/90), the 2002-3 class size mean was 26.4; five years ago (77/90) it was 25.18, and projected class size for next year (79/90) was 31.83. Respondents were asked whether class size was appropriate for learning (87/90), with 45.7% saying yes, and 53.3% saying no. Most who said the current class size was appropriate acknowledged, “Our school has been fortunate to have small class sizes. Next year will be different.” The majority did not believe class size was appropriate and expressed concerns about how to meet the needs of their students. “Many students need one-on-one attention and I can do that with 25 students, not 36, like this year and next;” and “Classes are too big! It’s more crowd control!” Several teachers described problems of space, safety, and supplies in addition to questioning how they could address learner needs. “We’re crowded in rooms. Not enough texts. Kids fall between the cracks. More behavior-problem kids;” and “I have a lab designed for 24. It gets dangerous and shoulder-to-shoulder with more.”

To the question, Are you teaching more students with special needs than you were five years ago? (79/90), 81% responded yes. Almost half of these respondents noted that they had more identified students on IEP’s in their classes, especially children with ADHD, ADD, autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, CP, and ESL. They noted, “More special needs, less help;” and “more inclusion and fewer teachers and special education. We can’t provide adequate services.” A fifth of the “yes” respondents volunteered that they have more at-risk students from dysfunctional families, often with behavioral issues.

Two questions asked whether specialists were cut in schools and which specialty positions were cut. 28% stated that no specialists had been cut, some noting that such cuts had already happened in previous years, while 72% said yes. Among these respondents (87/90), the music and PE specialists were hardest hit, followed by counselors, art teachers, shop teachers, and so forth. One respondent summed up the cuts as, “everything but the core academic classes.” Several of the respondents lamented the loss of offerings and electives for students, fewer class periods in these areas, and worries about further cuts next year. The loss of specialists also meant prep periods for classroom teachers became increasingly rare, as there was no coverage.

Respondents (89/90) were asked, Are your students being affected by the current state of funding? 95.5% said yes, 4.5% said no. One respondent queried, “Who wrote this question, Lars Larson?! How could fewer art supplies, no conferences, fewer music/PE hours, fewer options like recorders, and fewer days not affect them?” The overarching theme was loss for students: loss of programs; loss of opportunities; loss of individual attention; loss of time through days cut; loss of supplies, equipment, and materials; loss of support and assistance, and loss of enthusiasm and interest in school. Another major concern was student feelings. “They feel less valued, unwanted, unimportant;” “kids feel slighted. The self-worth of students is affected.”
Other ways students were affected were the extra costs students had to pay: “They need to raise more money for their own education;” lack of adequate preparation, especially for high school students; and tired, stressed teachers: “They don’t get the best of their teacher. Teachers are less patient.” One of the four teachers who said students were not affected by the budget crisis stated, “We keep sucking it up so that they aren’t affected.”

Research Question 4: What changes did teachers make in their teaching during the budget crisis?

Respondents (89/90) were asked, What are the three most significant changes in your teaching as a result of budget cuts? Half of them discussed “No frills teaching,” stating that they focused on the basics, gave more lectures, did fewer special projects, had less group work/cooperative learning activities, offered fewer elective choices, individualized less, did less hands-on and less fun or creative activities. They taught less science, social studies, and arts because of days cut and class size increases. Almost all respondents discussed a variety of losses in their teaching. Supplies, textbooks, equipment and field trips were severely curtailed or nonexistent. Loss of time (cut days, prep time, less time to work with individual students); loss of specialists, aides, custodians, and others in their schools; and loss of jobs were lamented. Larger class sizes with less individualized attention, effects on students, and more fundraising efforts were other changes discussed by almost all teachers. About half talked about morale issues, uncertainty, and stress: “I feel stretched thin as a teacher;” “Increased negativity—losing the love of teaching;” “Lack of community support—I feel abandoned!” Finally, 25% discussed teacher sacrifice in the teaching context. In addition to personal financial problems brought about by days cut, several talked about having to spend “more personal time on work with less prep time;” “being stretched between two schools;” “teaching three classes at once to accommodate students;” and “buying supplies with personal money.”

To the question, What are the three hardest aspects of teaching in this current budget crisis? (88/90), only 16 respondents mentioned their own personal sacrifice, particularly the loss of salary and retirement benefits. Most of the responses dwelled on other concerns, such as instructional issues, effects on students, morale, and political and economic aspects. They described their frustration in teaching: “More and more piled onto teachers—we lost six specialists, attendance, NCLB, recess duty, no aide support, etc.” “Inability to provide students with a high quality education;” “Being expected to do the same quality job with less funding.” They discussed increased class size, time concerns, fewer supplies, and effects on students. Almost all respondents mentioned morale, uncertainty, and political/economic aspects: “Morale. Being on a sinking ship is no fun;” “Feeling undervalued;” “Increased stress because I have more responsibility;” “Staff morale—anger, depression. Sorrow as we lose colleagues.” Uncertainty was mentioned 18 times: “Uncertainty—what can I count on for next year?” and “The fact that there looks to be no end in sight.” Twenty respondents discussed political/economic aspects as hardest: “Maintaining quality of education while being degraded publicly and asked to do more and more for less pay and appreciation;” “State demands increase, but no funding to support it.”

Educational Importance

Our research questions revealed the following:

Research Question 1: What were teacher attitudes about their job satisfaction and what factors may affect their attitudes? Clearly, teacher satisfaction in our sample had declined from 8.76
five years previous to 7.61 in spring 2003. Teachers were not optimistic about schools (3.92), were angry about salary freezes (2.77), and the great majority would have retired if they could (about 70%), a particularly strong indicator of burnout and potential for attrition. Evidence suggested that such attrition did occur with highest numbers leaving between the 2002-3 and 2003-4 school years (Zanville, 2006). Teachers used more volunteers than previously, but generally did not think volunteers eased the state of funding burdens. In spite of the serious problems due to the funding shortfall, almost 60% still wanted to teach in Oregon and they felt that student achievement was similar to five years earlier, keeping their focus on student learning in spite of the crisis. Many participants vented their anger and frustration with politics, calling for fixing the funding situation, and expressing dissatisfaction about their working conditions.

Research Question 2: What were the personal and financial issues teachers faced during the budget crisis? Many teachers in the sample had days cut from their contract (a mean of 5.92 days), with resulting loss of salary. Some 91% indicated their salaries had been affected, even if days were not cut. Most respondents had to do major belt tightening, with 28% or partners taking on second jobs and many describing personal sacrifices. Health was a major issue, with 73% describing stress, sleep loss, emotional problems, exhaustion, and multiple health problems. The evidence showed that teachers faced major personal and financial problems as a result of the budget shortfall.

Research Question 3: How did classroom and working conditions change because of the budget crisis? The average teacher in our sample worked almost 51 hours, 11 hours beyond the 40-hour work week. Nationally, Stoddard and Kuhn (2004) estimated that teachers in 1999 worked 9.63 hours outside the classroom, with an average work week of 43.8 hours. The majority were concerned with class size, which averaged 26.4 for this group in 2002-2003, stating that the classes were too big to address individual student needs and safety issues. Most (81%) noted that they had more students with special needs in their classes with less help. Most (72%) also noted that specialists had been cut, with only the core academic teachers remaining. Working conditions became much more difficult for teachers during this crisis; yet working conditions are critical for preventing burnout and attrition (Dworkin, 2001; Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Ingersol, 2001; Valli & Busse, 2007). Most teachers also discussed negative effects on students, with loss of opportunities, programs, and attention, as well as effects on student feelings.

Research Question 4: What changes did teachers make in their teaching during the budget crisis? Half the respondents did "no frills teaching" with fewer projects, student choices, or group work. Almost all discussed loss: supplies, textbooks, field trips, time with students, prep time, specialists, custodians, and other job losses. Half talked about morale problems, dealing with uncertainty and stress and how this negatively affected their teaching. Most felt that the hardest aspects were instructional issues, effects on students, and morale.

Discussion

Similar to findings from earlier studies relative to teachers and school funding problems (Calfee & Pessirilo-Jurasic, 1980; Francis, 1991; Ginsberg, et al, 1987; Schwartz, et al, 1983; Shiman, 1983), our study illuminated how the climate in schools and the community during the budget crisis affected psychological well-being and led to withdrawal in teachers. Indicators of burnout and potential for attrition along with anger about politics and losses were similarities to earlier research. In addition, our study also found changes in instruction, multiple health issues, concerns for students, teacher altruism, and
personal and financial issues that these earlier studies did not address.

The stress of classroom conditions with loss of preparation time due to specialist cuts increased class sizes, decreased class time, prompted teachers to spend 51 hours per week on school work, produced uncertainty about the future, and led to an inability to address the needs of their learners. These structural aspects of a failed larger organization are major factors in burnout or attrition and indicative of severe intensification of work (Hargraves, 1992). Only the most resilient teachers seemed able to cope, and some discussed coping by caring less. We propose that the outcomes for teachers occurred along a "Withdrawal Behaviors Spectrum," from those with personal coping styles that made them immune to such issues to those who were too tired to care, to those who would leave teaching immediately if they could.

Clearly, teachers had to make considerable personal sacrifices in 2002-2003, while anticipating additional sacrifices the following year. Teachers in this sample were an altruistic group who focused more on their students and their profession than themselves when describing the serious instructional and personal issues they faced. When almost three-fourths of those who responded believe their health was affected, those teachers remaining in classrooms are at risk for burnout and more serious health problems even when the situation improves. And when teachers cope by no longer caring, students are also at risk.

In the 2002-2003 school year, the dollar amount spent per student declined roughly $464 (calculated by reducing the previous year's per student expenditure by 6.1%, as reported by Oregon School Fund Defense, 2006, from the Epodunk, 2004, figure). The impact of this reduction was documented through our collected data; the $464 loss was crippling when considering the compounded impact on individual teachers, classrooms, schools, and districts.

Respondents recognized the long-term effects of the budget crisis on the future of this state. The economic costs to Oregon (and other states) of having fewer and failing schools and exhausted, stressed teachers need to be considered. Teacher voice has been largely ignored in understanding the effects of such school funding crises on teachers and the repercussions for students and families. In fact, we were unable to find any research done after 1991 on the effects of budget shortfalls on those inside schools.

Halford (1998, p. 33) noted that "education is the profession that eats its young." Because both novices and experienced teachers in the dire circumstances of the budget crisis experienced emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishments in relation to job performance, a sense of alienation, and the inability to cope with massive stresses, they may opt out of teaching (Dworkin, 2001), increasing the rate of attrition. According to Honig and Hatch (2004), all the recent policy demands (NCLB, inclusion, accountability, reform, etc.) and budget woes require dynamic coherence and buffering of frontline workers by district or state offices, but there was little or no buffer for schools and teachers experiencing this crisis. The evidence from this study suggests that unless there is a change in "politics as usual" in Oregon and schools are adequately funded, Oregon's budget crisis may have devoured beginning teachers and experienced teachers alike. In addition, the working conditions of teachers were clearly compromised and need to be improved to prevent attrition (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin, 2004; Ingersol, 2001).

How do we get politicians and voters to understand the impact of the budget instability and shortfalls on schools, which teachers have endured since the 1990 property tax limitation?
Ehrenberg, Ehrenberg, Smith, and Zhang (2004) found that if school budgets are defeated, they are more likely to be defeated again, so in most Oregon districts chance of increases are miniscule. According to Westerman and Cyr (2004) a major issue is the divide between the values espoused by voters and the legislature (no more taxes) and those of teachers and schools (helping students learn). The Chalkboard Project may be able to help address this aspect. Yet Oregon might be called the “State of belief.” Even when citizens are shown there is little or no waste, fraud, or abuse in schools, what is believed seems to be impervious to data, facts and figures; in short, data-free analysis and decision-making. Politicians certainly recognize and capitalize on this disconnect between information and what we believe. At issue is how to educate people about funding issues to overcome these beliefs.

In 2007, sunnier financial times increased the state’s income tax and general funds, and Oregon schools were given more funding after 17 years of continual budget tightening (Thompson & Green, 2004; Carter, 2007). However, the recent national housing market slump and losses in the mortgage market are likely harbingers of another downturn in the economy and future school budget woes. Policy changes are needed that address the long-term effects of insufficient and unstable school funding.

Further Research

Future research should look at teacher perspectives during better times, such as 2007, comparing responses to the 2003 sample. We also need to consider other voices inside schools: administrators, students, and parents, as well as teachers in both bad and good financial times. We need research on the effects of school budget shortfalls on student drop-out rates. Finally, studies that look directly at teacher satisfaction, burnout, and attrition related to school funding shortfalls in other states need to be carried out.

References


Oregon Department of Education (2002). *Oregon report card: An annual report to the Legislature on Oregon public schools* (October). Salem, OR: www.ode.state.or.us


Shockley, R., Guglielmino, P., & Watlington,


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Ranked Item Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9 Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level