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Teacher Time Use and Affect During COVID-19

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POLICY ISSUE

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a shutdown of school buildings across the United States and a subsequent unplanned nationwide transition to remote learning. For teachers, these school building closures resulted in a transformation of many facets of their work, requiring them to take on new and often shifting roles, including learning new technologies and juggling work and home responsibilities. While a number of studies have documented aspects of teachers' time use and affect during this unprecedented set of shifts, most have surveyed teachers at a single time point. None have tracked on teachers' experiences before and after schools closed as a result of COVID. Therefore, education leaders and policymakers are left with an incomplete—or possibly less accurate—picture of teachers' experience throughout this historic period.

In *Teacher Time Use and Affect During COVID-19*, the authors used a unique end-of-day time diary with a sample of 250 teachers in two urban school districts, including one district that allowed the research team to continue collecting data once schools closed in Spring 2020. While representing a relatively small sample of teachers, the study's rich, longitudinal data provide the most direct and detailed evidence yet of teachers' work before and immediately after spring 2020 school closures, including insight into changes in time spent on specific tasks, and in teachers' emotions while engaged in specific work activities.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

Findings from the study point to a dramatic restructuring of teachers' workdays immediately following pandemic-related school closures, including:

- **Less time spent on instruction:** As shown in Figure 1, prior to COVID-19, instruction consumed half of teachers' workdays (approximately 214 minutes per day, or 52% of their total work time). In the wake of the transition to remote learning, the amount of time per day teachers spent on instruction dropped dramatically to 61 minutes per day, or just 18% of their time.
- **More time spent in meetings and on planning, grading, and assessment:** Overall, the amount of time reported across these activities increased from 29% prior to COVID-19 to 66% post-school closures. Teachers reported increases in planning (from 69 to 107 minutes daily), grading/assessment (8 to 43 minutes), and interacting with parents (7 to 20 minutes).

AUTHORS' NOTE

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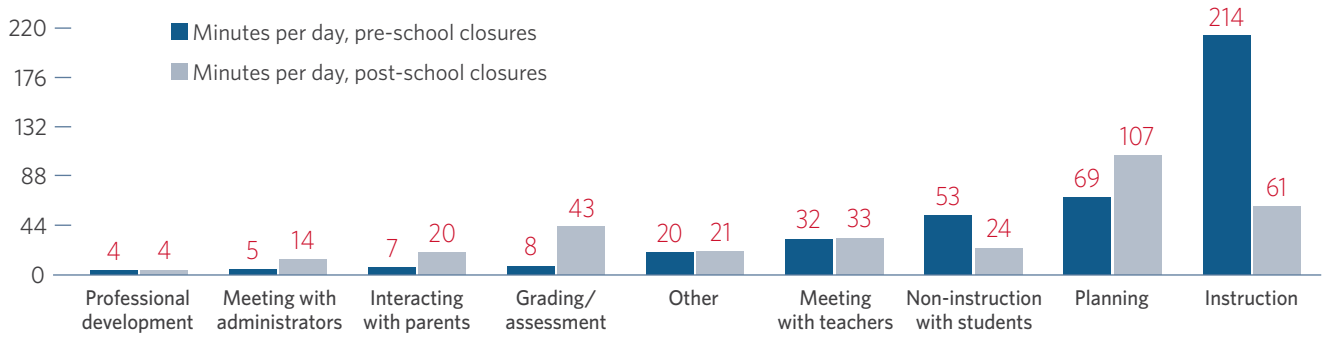
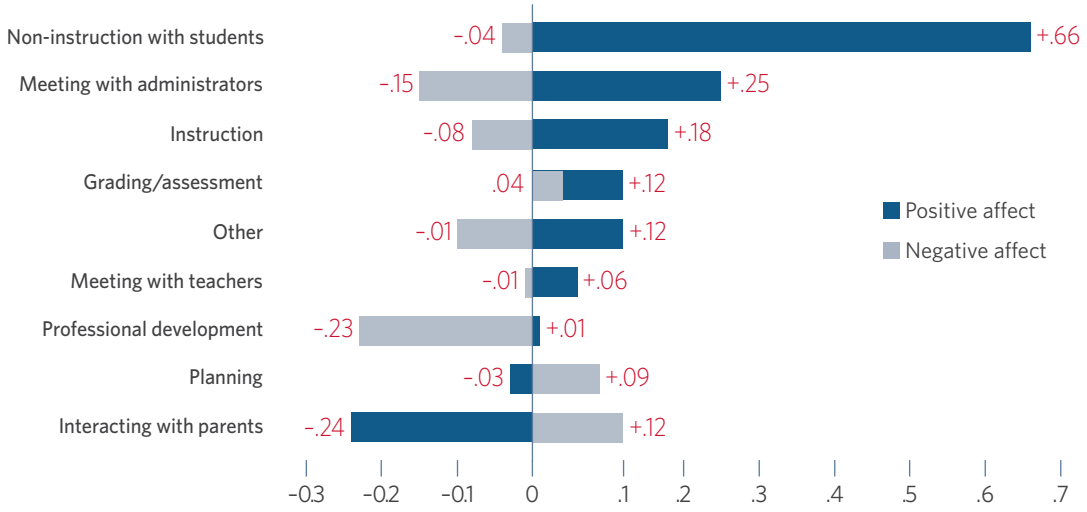
FIGURE 1: Changes in Teacher Time Use Across Activities, 2019-2020 School Year



Equally important, given prior research establishing the impact of teacher affect on student achievement and teacher retention, the study also found profound shifts in teachers' emotions while participating in various tasks, including:

- **Teachers reported higher levels of positive affect when engaging with students:** As shown in Figure 2, in the immediate months following school closures, teachers reported increased positive affect while engaged in some activities. Of these, interacting with students (e.g., instruction, non-instruction activities with students) was the experience most strongly associated with positive emotions. This was true both before but especially right after COVID-19-related school closures.
- **Negative affect did not increase post-school closures, though positive affect declined:** COVID-19 did NOT initially or immediately result in changes to teachers' negative affect overall. One exception to this finding is that teachers reported more negative affect when meeting with administrators in the post-school closures context.

FIGURE 2: Post-COVID-19 Change in Teacher Affect by Activity



The Positive and Negative Affect Scale ranges from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).
Graph above depicts differences between average affect pre- v. post-pandemic teaching.

More information on the study design, sample, and methods employed is available in the full working paper.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study may, on the one hand, prove only valuable as a descriptive portrait of teacher time use and affect during the beginning months of the historic COVID-19 pandemic.

But, we believe the findings have some applicability to any period involving a rapid transition from in-person to remote learning. And, the findings reveal some underlying truths about the value that teachers derive from their work Below, we offer possible implications for policy.

First, in the case of future closures, the data from this study suggests that it may be most advantageous for

everyone to prioritize teachers' time with students. Not only would this counter concerns about lost learning time for students, but as is shown through this study, it would also support positive teacher affect, which may benefit teacher morale and com- mitment. These results remind us that we need to facilitate working condi- tions that allow teachers to focus their efforts on their students. To do this, particularly in light of future shifts due to the pandemic, leaders will need to put systems in place now to mitigate the additional planning and administrative meeting burdens teachers experienced in the spring of 2020.

Second, data from the study showed that there was more variation in teacher affect across teachers than across the different activities in which teachers engaged. This suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting teachers is probably insufficient in meeting their needs and that there is more opportunity for differentiation for teachers across their various respon- sibilities. For instance, some teachers report more positive affect while plan- ning or when interacting with parents. There may be benefits to tailoring roles to allow teachers to specialize in areas where they experience greater positive affect.

Finally, regardless of future closures, arguably the greatest contribution

of this study is the nuanced insight provided by its more intentional and in-depth collection of longitudinal, quantitative data around teachers' time use and affect during the school day. It shows that if studies only ask teachers about their typical time use or their overall feelings, they may not accurately capture teachers' actual experiences. As the authors demonstrate in this paper, a more careful accounting of teachers' affect and time use holds the potential to show a far more nuanced picture of how teachers navigate their work. Although this study only focused on the initial months of the pandemic, similar approaches to data collection will likely prove vital in helping us to understand teachers' experiences as the conditions of their work continue to change.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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