



Teaching in Focus #36

Give teachers a say:
Facing the challenge of
teachers' work-related stress
in the COVID-19 crisis



Teaching & Learning

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- On average across OECD countries, teachers who are satisfied with their terms of employment are significantly less likely to say they intend to leave the profession within the next five years, while teachers experiencing work-related stress are more likely to.
- In 2018, even before the current COVID-19 crisis, keeping up with changing requirements was a source of stress for 41% of teachers, on average across OECD countries.
- Staff participation in school governance is significantly and positively related to teachers' satisfaction with their terms of employment in all OECD countries except for Alberta (Canada) and South Africa.

Throughout the world, teachers and schools are responding to one of the greatest disruptions to education systems in living memory. Routines and practices they have followed for decades have been changed, overhauled or suppressed to reduce the risk of contagion for students, teachers and parents, while ensuring continuity of teaching and learning. This puts the role and importance of teachers in the spotlight, while adding new demands and pressures to an already delicate job. When the COVID-19 crisis struck, teachers in many education systems had to teach in a new context of online contact and uncertainty over the reopening of schools. When schools opened again, they did so amidst varying safety measures and the constant threat of school closures. All this is likely to have substantially affected teachers' job satisfaction and stress.

Although the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS 2018) has no data on teachers' stress levels or job satisfaction during or after the COVID-19 crisis, it does provide information about how these elements are linked to teacher retention. This could provide a useful insight into the possible implication of the stress caused by the current health crisis.

This brief uses data collected before the COVID-19 crisis to answer two questions: How are teachers' stress and job satisfaction related to their willingness to stay in their job in the long run? What can governments do to improve teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions in these exceptional times?

What is TALIS?

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), established in 2008, is the first major international survey of teachers and school leaders on different aspects affecting student learning. It gives a voice to teachers and school leaders, allowing them to provide input into educational policy analysis and development in key areas.

The international target population for TALIS 2018 is lower secondary teachers and their school leaders in mainstream public and private schools. For the 2018 survey, a representative sample of 4 000 teachers and their school principals from 200 schools were randomly selected in each country. Across all survey components, approximately 260 000 teachers responded to the survey, representing more than 8 million teachers in 48 participating countries and economies.

In this *Teaching in Focus*, a TALIS average is estimated based on the arithmetic average of lower secondary teacher data across the 48 OECD countries and economies participating in TALIS.

Data collection took place between September and December 2017 for Southern Hemisphere participants and March to May 2018 for Northern Hemisphere participants. Since the data were collected before the COVID-19 crisis, please note that some of the frequencies and relationships among the variables reported here may have changed. More information is available at www.oecd.org/education/talis.

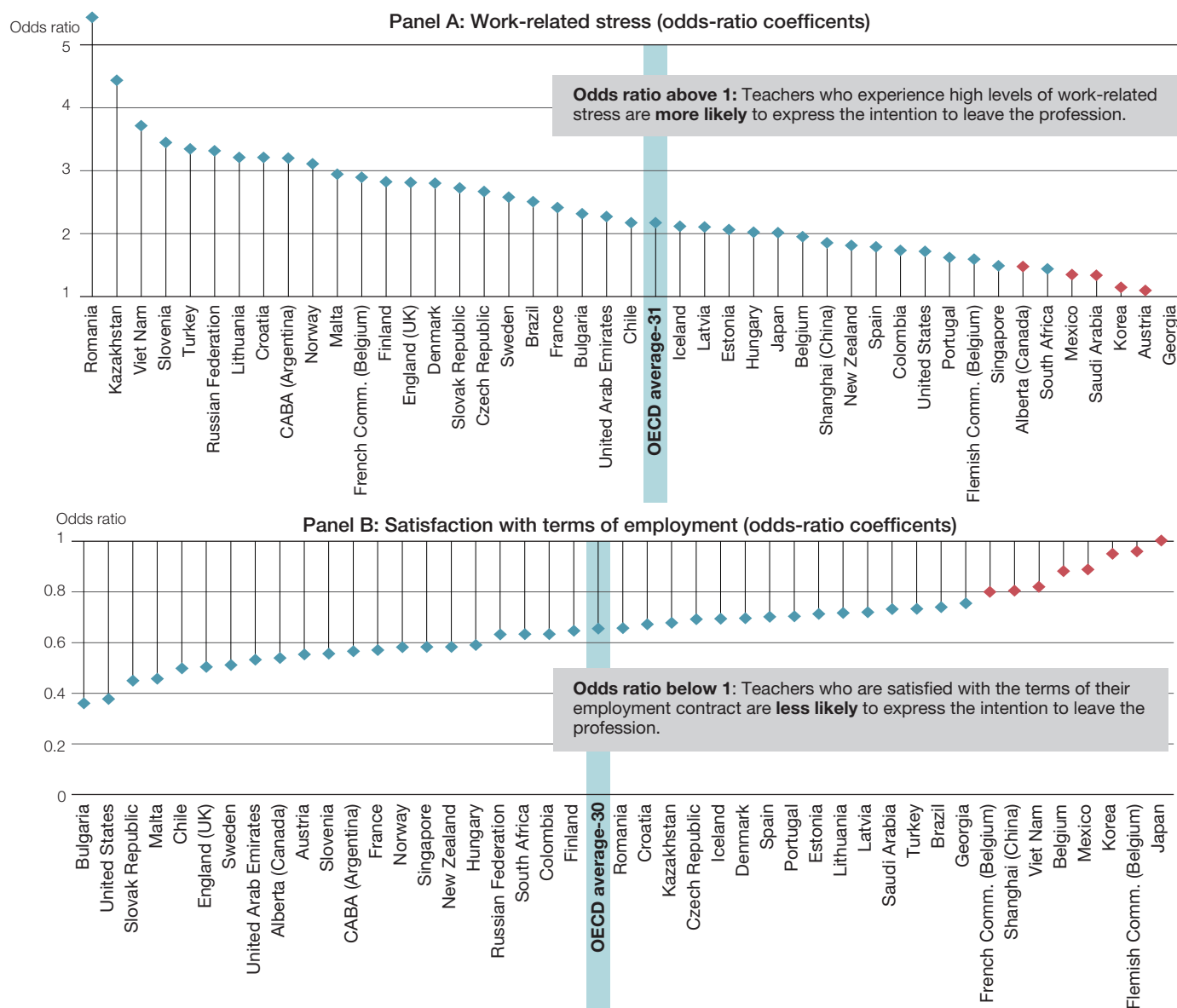
Job satisfaction, workplace stress and school retention

In TALIS, teachers report how satisfied they are with the terms of their teaching contract or employment, excluding their salaries. These terms can include benefits, work schedule or anything else that affects their perceptions of their terms of employment. Teachers also answer a number of questions on work-related stress. Work-related stress is closely related to working conditions, as it is produced by an imbalance between work demands and resources. Workers experience stress when their work demands do not correspond to their knowledge, skills or the support they receive at work.

On average for teachers across OECD countries and economies, both work-related stress and satisfaction with their terms of employment are associated with their intention to leave teaching within the next five years (Figure 1). Teachers experiencing work-related stress are more likely to be considering leaving the teaching profession, while teachers who are more satisfied with their employment terms are less likely to be doing so. This finding is consistent with the intuitive view that, to some extent, improving teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions can compensate for an increase in their work-related stress.

Figure 1. Intention to leave teaching within the next five years, related to work-related stress and satisfaction with the terms of employment

Likelihood of intention to leave teaching within the next five years related (in two distinct logistic regressions) to work-related stress and satisfaction with the terms of employment



1. Results of binary logistic regression based on responses of lower secondary teachers and principals. Only countries and economies with data for both regressions (Panel A and Panel B) are shown in the chart.

2. An odds ratio indicates the degree to which an explanatory variable is associated with a categorical outcome variable. An odds ratio below one denotes a negative association; an odds ratio above one indicates a positive association; and an odds ratio of one means that there is no association.

3. The predictor is a dummy variable: the reference category refers to experiencing the dummy variable. The reference categories are: teachers not experiencing work-related stress "a lot" (Panel A) and not being satisfied with other terms of the teaching contract/employment, apart from salary ("disagree" or "strongly disagree") (Panel B).

4. The results in Panel A and Panel B are obtained from regressions using different sets of control variables. Both regressions control for teacher characteristics (gender, age, years of experience as a teacher at current school, working full-time) and the share of students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes in the classroom. In addition, the results in Panel A also controlled for the share of students with behavioural problems and of low achievers in the classroom; the results in Panel B also controlled for school characteristics (school location index, school type and school size).

Note: The coefficients in Panel A and Panel B cannot be compared directly, as they are derived from different regressions including different sets of control variables. Statistically significant coefficients are marked in a darker tone.

Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the likelihood of intending to leave the profession related to satisfaction with the terms of the employment contract (Panel A) and to work-related stress (Panel B).

Source: OECD (2020_[1]), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en>, Figure II.3.12.

Teachers who report experiencing stress “a lot” in their work are more likely to report that they wish to leave teaching within the next five years in all OECD countries and economies with available data except for Alberta (Canada), Austria, Korea, Mexico and the Netherlands, after controlling for teacher and classroom characteristics (Figure 1). This result could mean that teachers want to leave the profession because they are stressed. Alternatively, it could be that some unobserved factor has an impact on both work-related stress and the intention to leave (e.g. effective teachers could experience less stress because they are successful in the classroom, and are less willing to leave).

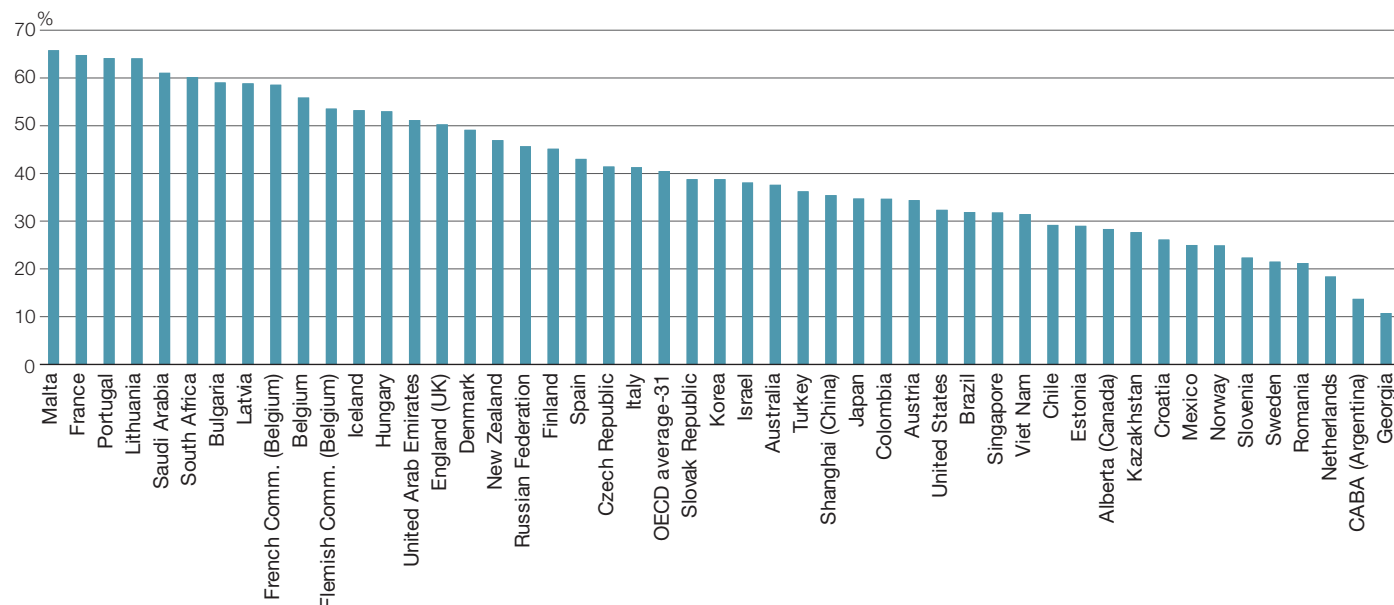
Teachers who are satisfied with their terms of employment are significantly less likely to say they intend to leave the profession within the next five years in all OECD countries except for Belgium (Flemish and French communities), Japan, Korea and Mexico (Figure 1). This result holds after controlling for teacher characteristics (gender, age, years of experience as a teacher at current school, working full time); classroom composition (students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes); and school characteristics (school location index, school type and school size). The relationship found between teachers’ satisfaction with terms of employment and their intention to leave could be causal (i.e. teachers want to leave because they are not satisfied with their conditions) or due to unobserved factors (e.g. personality traits influencing both variables).

The new requirements imposed on education systems and the teaching profession by the COVID-19 health crisis (such as the active efforts required to enforce the necessary degree of social distancing among students) are likely to induce substantial work-related stress in teachers.

Keeping up with changing requirements can be an important source of stress for teachers. For example, on average across the OECD in 2018 (before the current COVID-19 crisis), 41% of teachers reported that “keeping up with changing requirements from local, municipal/regional, state or national/federal authorities” was a source of stress “quite a bit” or “a lot” (Figure 2). This proportion varies from around two-thirds of teachers in France, Lithuania, Malta and Portugal to less than 20% in Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires [hereafter CABA (Argentina)], Georgia and the Netherlands.

Figure 2. Keeping up with changing requirements as a source of teacher stress

Proportion of lower secondary teachers reporting that “keeping up with changing requirements from local, municipal/regional, state or national/federal authorities” is a source of stress “quite a bit” or “a lot”



Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the proportion of teachers reporting that keeping up with changing requirements is a source of stress.

Source: OECD (2020_[1]), TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en>, Table II.3.43.

What can be done to retain teachers?

While governments may find it difficult to avert the additional stress that the current situation is placing on teachers, they can take actions to make sure that teachers feel compensated for the stress by adequate working conditions.

Logistic regression analyses shed light on how teachers’ tendency to report being satisfied with their terms of employment is related to a variety of factors, including part-time and fixed-term work, their own and their schools’ characteristics, and classroom composition. Two variables are positively and significantly associated with satisfaction with terms of employment in almost all education systems:

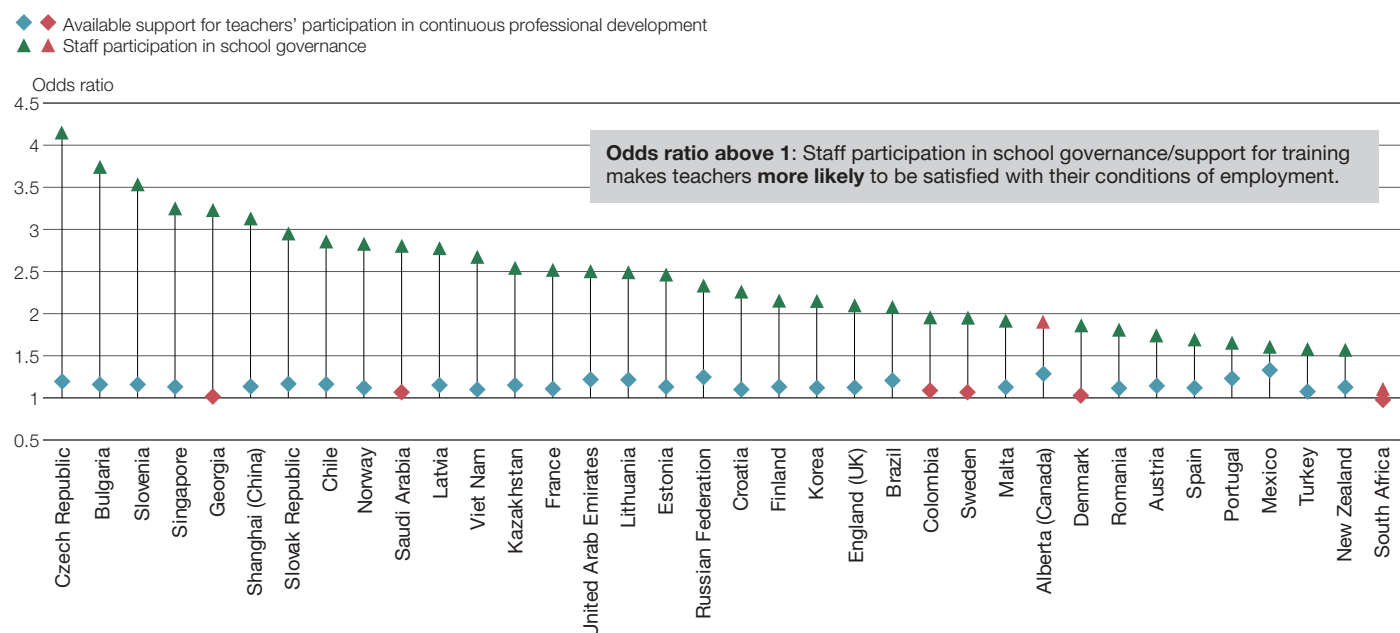
- Staff participation in school governance. This is a binary indicator measuring whether teachers consider that their school provides opportunities for staff to actively participate in school decisions or encourages staff to lead new

initiatives. Participating in school governance means having opportunities to shape the work environment. This could be particularly important in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis, where teachers are required to adapt and contribute to an overhaul of school practices and routines to reduce the risk of contagion for students, parents and themselves.

- Support for continuous professional development. This measures the number of forms of support that teachers report receiving in the 12 months prior to the survey. The material support teachers receive for continuous professional development (e.g. reimbursements, provision of materials and salary increases, and reduction of teaching hours) could affect their satisfaction with the terms of employment as they are part of the employee benefit packages (Daley, 2008^[2]; Thibault Landry, Schweyer and Whillans, 2017^[3]). Continuous professional development activities include participation in online seminars, education conferences and networks of teachers, which could be important channels for spreading information about the new practices and routines required during the COVID-19 crisis.

Participation in school governance is positively related with teachers' satisfaction with their terms of employment in all education systems with available data, except for Alberta (Canada) and South Africa. In addition, the support available for teachers' participation in continuous professional development is positively and significantly related to their satisfaction with their terms of employment in about four-fifths of the countries and economies with available data (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Teachers' satisfaction with the terms of their employment, related to staff participation in governance and support for teachers' continuous professional development
Likelihood of being satisfied with the terms of the teaching contract/employment (apart from salary), related to key explanatory variables



1. Results of binary logistic regression based on responses of lower secondary teachers and principals. The predictors have different scales (0-1 for staff participation in school governance and 0-12 for support for training), which explains the differences in the coefficients within each education system.

2. An odds ratio indicates the degree to which an explanatory variable is associated with a categorical outcome variable. An odds ratio below one denotes a negative association; an odds ratio above one indicates a positive association; and an odds ratio of one means that there is no association.

3. Support for continuous professional development is a discrete variable: it refers to the available support for teachers' participation in continuous professional development (the number of forms of support for continuous professional development that teachers report receiving in the 12 months prior to the survey). Teachers could report receiving any of eight forms of support: reimbursement or payment of costs, monetary supplements for activities outside of the working hours, increased salary, release from teaching duties for activities during regular working hours, non-monetary support for activities outside working hours, material needed for the activities, non-monetary rewards and non-monetary professional benefits.

4. Staff participation in school governance is a binary categorical variable equal to 1 if teachers "agree" or "strongly agree" with at least one of two statements on participation in school governance ("this school provides staff with opportunities to actively participate in school decisions" and "this school encourages staff to lead new initiatives").

5. The administration of the question on mechanisms to support participation in continuous professional development was optional for TALIS countries and economies. Of the participating countries and economies, 43 took this option. Therefore, the OECD and TALIS averages are not displayed in the chart.

6. Controlling for the following: teacher characteristics (gender, age, working hours, years of experience as a teacher at current school, working full-time); classroom composition (students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, teacher-student relation index); and school characteristics (school location index, school type and school size).

Note: Statistically significant coefficients are marked in a darker tone.

Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the likelihood of being satisfied with the terms of the teaching contract or employment (apart from salary) related to staff participation in school governance.

Source: OECD (2020^[1]), TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals, <https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en>, Table II.3.69.

These results have acquired particular relevance as the teaching profession adapts to the changing demands brought by the COVID-19 crisis. Since teachers are being called on to help shape the new educational environment, they should be given a say in how to implement the new requirements, at least for decisions at the school level. It cannot be easy, or stress-free, for teachers to abruptly change the routines and practices they have been trained in and they have used in the past while facing concrete dangers to their health. Effectively including teachers in the decision-making process could both improve the process itself and make teachers feel more empowered and satisfied with the conditions of their work environment.

In addition, teachers may particularly welcome support for continuous professional development at a time when they need constantly updated information on how to carry out their job. Teachers are having to absorb and master very quickly new, complex information on responding to health risks, changes in student behaviour and adapting teaching practices. This requires substantial effort from them, and actively supporting this effort (e.g. through reducing their teaching time or providing financial incentives) is one way to compensate them for the work-related stress they might experience.

The bottom line

The unprecedented challenge faced by education systems risks not only degrading the learning environment for students, but also substantially increasing work-related stress among teachers. This is not a trivial matter, as TALIS 2018 data collected prior to the crisis showed that work-related stress is an important predictor of teachers' intention to leave the profession in the next few years. Governments must ensure that teachers feel compensated for the additional stress they are experiencing by giving them satisfactory working conditions. Ensuring that teachers are enabled to participate in school governance and given support to participate in continuous professional development are two ways to achieve that in this difficult period of continuous change.

www.oecd.org/education/talis/

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For more information

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