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Reading and Writing Habits of American Students

Independent reading and writing habits of American students have remained relatively stable across all age groups since 1984, with a few exceptions, according to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education.

Although the percentage of students writing letters, notes, or messages has remained nearly constant over the years, more eighth graders in 1994 reported writing stories outside of school at least once a week than in 1984. Also, between 1984 and 1994, the percentage of eighth- and 11th-grade students who reported keeping a diary or journal increased.

Between 1984 and 1994, a greater percentage of 9-year-olds than 13- and 17-year-olds reported reading for fun almost every day. In addition, fourth-grade students were more likely than eighth-grade students to report that they wrote stories outside of class at least once a week.

In 1994, 9-, 13- and 17-year-old students who reported reading for fun at least once a week had higher average reading proficiency scores than students who reported that they never or hardly ever read for fun.

In 1994, the types of materials students read at home and school varied. For all ages, students reported having most recently read a science, social studies, or mathematics book in school than at home, while they reported most recently reading magazines more at home than in school. Nine-year-olds and 13-year-olds reported having most recently read stories more at home, while 17-year-olds reported reading stories more at school.—From National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Almanac: Reading 1984 to 1994 and Writing 1984 to 1994, 1996.*

Teachers' Participation in Professional Development

In the 1993-1994 school year, 50 percent or more of full-time American public school teachers participated in professional development on topics including uses of educational technology for instruction, methods of teaching in their subject field, student assessment, and cooperative learning in the classroom.

Full-time public school teachers were more likely to participate in activities relating to all types of professional development topics than were full-time private school teachers. Full-time public elementary school teachers were more likely to participate in activities on four of the five types of professional development topics than were their secondary school counterparts.

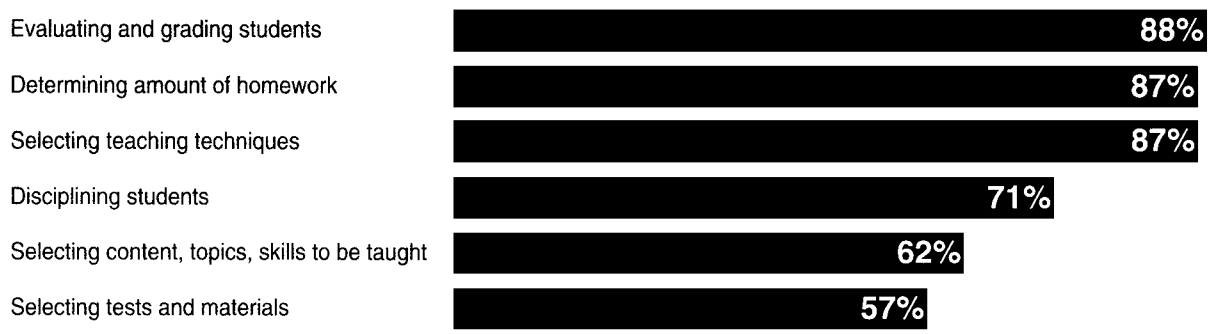
During the 1993-1994 school year, 48 percent of full-time public school teachers received release time from teaching for in-servicing, and 41 percent received scheduled time for professional development. Twenty-two percent received none of the available types of support.

Full-time private school teachers were less likely than their public school counterparts to receive professional growth credits and release time or scheduled time from teaching.

How Much Control Do Teachers Have Over Classroom Practices?

In the 1993-1994 school year, the vast majority of American teachers thought that they had a good deal of control in their own classrooms over practices such as evaluating and grading students, selecting teaching techniques, and determining the amount of homework to be assigned. Relatively fewer felt that they had a good deal of control over disciplining students, deciding what was taught, and selecting textbooks and other instructional materials. Private school teachers were more likely to think that they had a great deal of control in each of these areas, except for determining the amount of homework.

Percentage of U.S. Public School Teachers Reporting They Had a Good Deal of Control Over Classroom Practices: 1993-1994



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1993-1994 (Teacher Questionnaire).

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However, private school teachers were more likely to receive tuition and/or fees than were public school teachers.

Public elementary and secondary teachers in their first three years of teaching were more likely to have participated in a formal teacher-induction program than were teachers with four or more years of experience.

Professional development includes both seminars offered by schools or school districts and courses affiliated with institutions of higher learning. The extent to which teachers pursue professional development may indicate either their commitment to improve teaching practice, or salary structures that reward participation in professional development.—From U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, *Schools and Staffing Survey 1993-1994* (Teacher Questionnaire).

What Keeps Teachers in the Classroom?

Money may be an important motivation, but it is not the only thing that keeps teachers in the classroom. U.S. teachers are less likely in the late 1990s to rank compensation as the best way to keep them on board. They are more likely than in the past to cite discipline and safety issues.

Fifty-three percent of public school teachers who started the 1993-1994 school year at the same school as the previous year ("stayers") thought that the most important step schools could take to encourage them to keep teaching would be to provide higher salaries and better fringe benefits, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Yet the share of this group that ranked compensation first in making the profession more hospitable was down from 64 percent in 1988-1989.

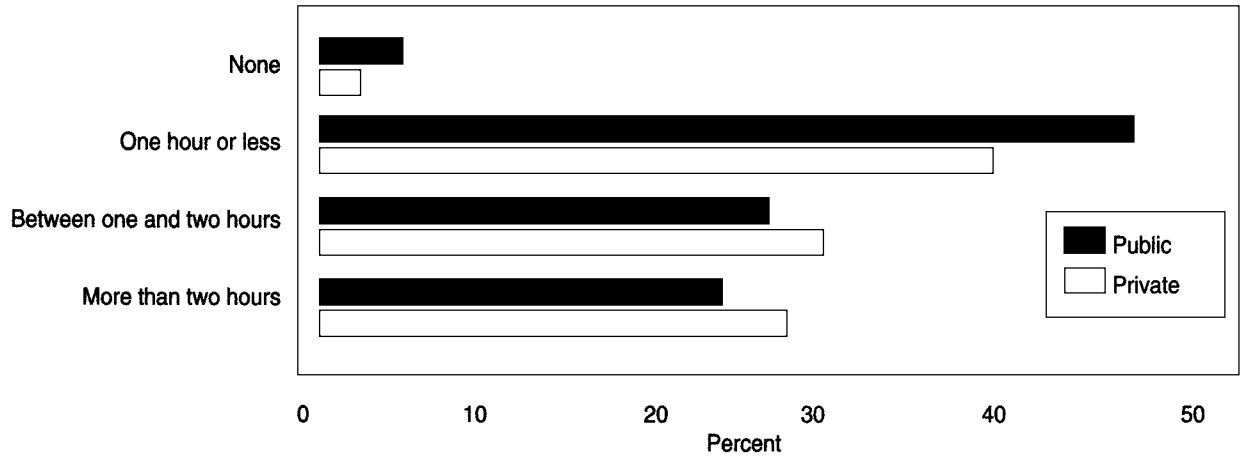
Teachers who no longer rank money first don't necessarily believe that it is less important than it used to be, but they may have more urgent concerns. Between 1988-1989 and 1994-1995, the share of teacher "stayers" who said that the most important thing schools could do to retain them was to improve discipline and safety more than doubled, from seven percent to 15 percent. This heightened concern drove some teachers out of the profession. Among those who stopped teaching after the 1993-1994 year, 21 percent said that improving discipline and safety was the best way to keep teachers, up from 10 percent who quit after the 1987-1988 school year.

Private school teachers are not immune from the issues that trouble their public school

How Much Homework Is Assigned by Elementary Teachers?

Homework is an important tool that teachers use to help students review and practice what they have learned, to teach children to work independently, and to encourage children to develop good habits and attitudes. In the 1994-1995 school year, 49 percent of U.S. public school teachers reported that their students spent more than one hour on homework during an average week, compared to 58 percent of private school elementary teachers. Only six percent of public and two percent of private school elementary teachers reported that their students spent no time on homework during an average week.

Amount of Time U.S. Elementary Students Spent on Homework in an Average Week, School Year 1994-1995*



* Elementary teachers surveyed included those whose main assignment was teaching "general elementary" and who taught in both the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 school years; therefore, new teachers were not included in this analysis.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Teacher Follow-up Survey, 1994-1995.

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colleagues. The share of private school teacher "stayers" placing the utmost priority on discipline and safety has also doubled in recent years, from six percent in 1988-1989 to 12 percent in 1994-1995.—From *Characteristics of Stayers, Movers, and Leavers: Results From the Teacher Follow-up Survey 1994-1995.*

Teacher Workloads

The average amount of time a full-time American teacher is required to spend at school makes up only about three-quarters of the teacher's work week.

In the 1993-1994 school year, full-time U.S. public school teachers were required to be at school an average of 33 hours per week to conduct classes, attend staff meetings, and fulfill a variety of other school-related responsibilities. The average was similar, whether they worked at the elementary or secondary level.

In addition to the required time at school, a full-time public school teacher worked an average of 12 additional hours per week before and after school and on weekends. Teachers spent three of these hours in activities involving students and nine hours in other school-related work, such as grading papers, preparing lessons, and meeting with parents.

Full-time public school teachers in rural areas and small towns spent more time on average than those in other types of communities in activities involving students.

On average, full-time private teachers in the U.S. were required to be at school about an hour more per week and spent about an hour more outside of school than their public school counterparts.

In 1992, the average amount of time per year public school teachers at the elementary level spent teaching (excluding other school responsibilities) in 15 countries (mostly European) was 858, ranging from a low of 624 hours in Sweden to a high of 1,093 hours in the United States.—From *U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1993-1994* (Teacher Questionnaire).