



2021 Virginia School Survey Research Brief

Series: Instructional Agency

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Key Findings

The 2021 Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions asked teachers and their aides to indicate their degree of agreement with nine statements to gauge how much instructional agency they had within their classroom. A total of 80,835 classroom instructors responded to the survey (68,419 teachers and 12,416 aides). Our analysis of their responses found:

- More than half of classroom instructors expressed having high or very high instructional agency.
- Classroom instructors reported greater instructional autonomy than respect.
- Teachers reported greater instructional autonomy than aides but were less likely than aides to report having sufficient planning and instructional time.
- Classroom instructors with higher instructional agency were more satisfied with their job than instructors with weaker agency.
- Classroom instructors with higher instructional agency were more likely than those with lower agency to report the intention to remain at the same school for another year.

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- Teachers in schools with the highest concentration of Black and Hispanic students reported the least instructional autonomy and teachers in schools with the lowest concentration reported the highest instructional autonomy.

Instructional Agency

An instructor's agency, or the degree to which they are entrusted and empowered to make instructional decisions for their students, has been shown to be a critical component of job satisfaction and retention. [1] While a comprehensive measure of instructor agency likely includes a full complement of political and structural factors within a school [2], the measure of instructional agency we analyzed for this brief included three components: classroom autonomy, being respected as an educator, and having sufficient time for planning and instruction. In this brief, we summarize the degree to which classroom instructors in Virginia public schools believe they have agency over their work and examine the extent to which that agency is correlated with school factors and an instructor's intention to remain at the school.

Table 1. Responses to Instructional Agency Survey Items Aggregated Across All Employees

Survey Item	Mean	% Of All Respondents					
		Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Somewhat Agree (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (6)
<i>Autonomy</i>							
I am trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	4.8	1.9	3.1	4.8	16.0	41.2	33.0
I am free to be creative in my teaching approach.	4.8	1.8	3.3	5.7	19.5	38.9	30.9
I control how I use my scheduled class time.	4.5	2.6	5.6	7.1	21.5	39.0	24.2
I set the grading and student assessment practices in my classroom. <i>(Asked only of Teachers).</i>	4.4	3.5	7.5	9.0	24.0	36.4	19.6
<i>Respect</i>							
I contribute to decisions about educational issues at my school.	4.1	4.5	9.2	11.9	30.3	32.0	12.2
My role as an educator is respected under current policies.	4.5	5.1	7.5	10.1	21.7	35.9	19.8
Current policies are improving our education system.	3.9	7.7	12.4	18.3	29.9	23.9	7.9
<i>Time</i>							
My scheduled workday includes sufficient planning time.	4.0	11.0	12.2	12.2	20.8	30.1	13.7
My scheduled workday includes sufficient instructional time to meet the needs of my students.	4.5	4.5	8.1	11.2	22.2	37.4	16.6

Measuring Instructional Agency

The wording for all nine survey items measuring instructional agency is provided in Table 1 together with the responses aggregated across the two groups of classroom instructors (teachers and aides). Classroom instructors expressed the strongest agency over being trusted to make sound decisions for their instruction (33% strongly agreed). At the other end of the agency spectrum, over a third (35%) either somewhat disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that current policies are improving our education system.

We theorized that these nine survey items were each an indicator of how much instructional agency the classroom instructors possessed. Specifically, we theorized that classroom instructors who strongly agreed with all the

statements had highest agency while those who strongly disagreed with all statements had lowest agency. Psychometric analysis confirmed our theory. We averaged the responses to all nine items to create a composite score for instructional agency and also averaged subsets of questions to create composite scores for the three components of instructional agency: autonomy, being respected, and having sufficient time for planning and instruction. As shown in Figure 1, these scores were mapped onto levels of instructional agency from very low to very high.

With respect to the overall measure, teachers and aides did not differ meaningfully in their perceptions of their instructional agency. A majority of both groups felt their agency could be improved with only 9% of teachers and 10% of aides expressing very high agency. [3] Both

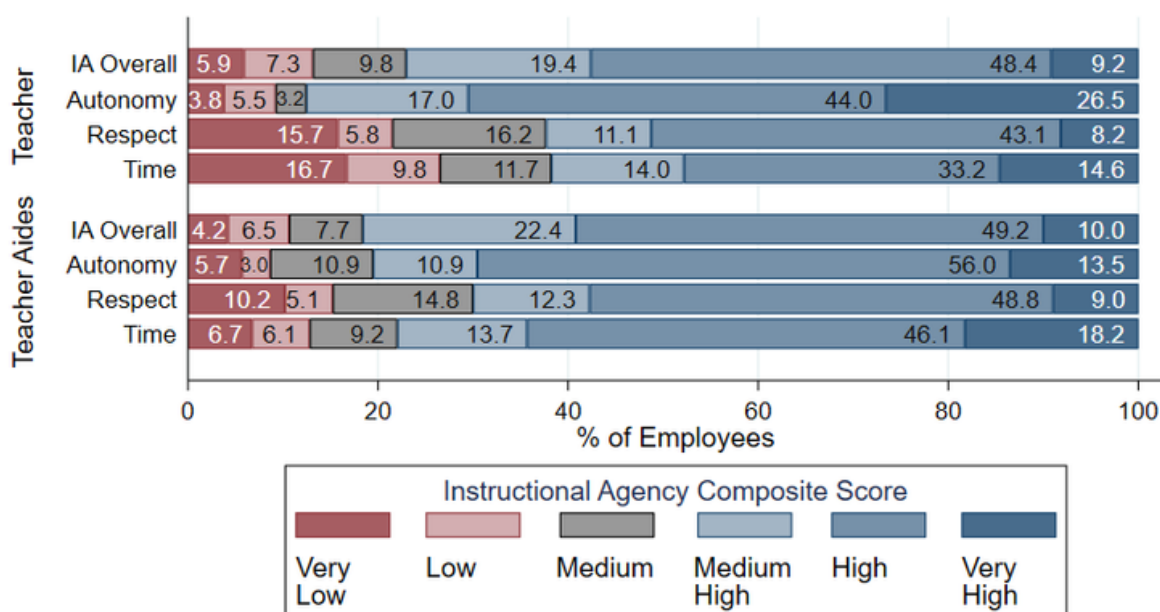


Figure 1. Levels of Instructional Agency among Classroom Instructors

Note: All composite scores are mapped to the categories as follows: 1.00 to 2.74 = very low, 2.75 to 3.25 = low, 3.26 to 3.74 = medium, 3.75 to 4.25 = medium high, 4.26 to 5.49 = high, and 5.50 to 6.00 = very high.

teachers and aides felt the most agency with regard to instructional autonomy and reported meaningfully more instructional autonomy than feeling respected. Teachers also expressed meaningfully more instructional autonomy than having sufficient planning and instructional time.

Teachers' and aides' perceptions of the three components of agency did differ, however (see Figure 1). Teachers reported having more autonomy than aides with 27% of teachers expressing very high agency on the autonomy component compared to 14% of aides. Aides, though, were more likely than teachers to report having sufficient planning and instructional time (18% of aides and 15% of teachers expressed very high agency on the time component). Finally, while teachers reported less respect than aides, the difference (0.18) fell just short of the threshold for meaningful difference. These findings were not surprising given that aides, as part of their job description, support the instructional goals and agenda set by the teacher (less autonomy) and have fewer responsibilities than teachers (fewer demands on their time).

In the rest of this brief, we focused on three groups

Defining Meaningful Differences Across Groups

When comparing responses to the instructional agency survey items and composite scores among and between teachers and aides or across types of schools, we needed a way to determine if the observed differences were meaningful and worth highlighting in this brief. We adopted the commonly used definition of a meaningful difference: a difference greater than or equal to 0.2 standard deviations. The instructional agency composite scores and survey item responses were standardized on the pooled sample in order to allow comparisons both across and within teachers and aides.

of classroom instructors with different levels of instructional agency: those that reported having low, medium high, and very high agency. We used these groups to demonstrate how agency is related to job satisfaction and retention and varies across schools.

Instructional Agency and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was highest among classroom instructors who reported very high instructional agency, as shown in Figure 2. Among teachers, 82% of those with very high agency strongly agreed that their school was a good place to work and learn compared to only 12% of teachers with low .

agency. The association between agency and job satisfaction is stronger among teachers than aides, as this roughly 70-percentage-point gap was 5-percentage points larger than the same gap for aides (84% versus 20%).

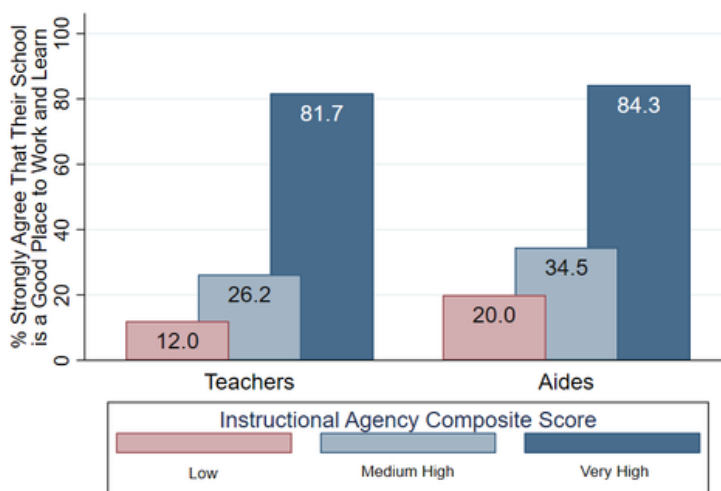


Figure 2. Percent Expressing the Highest Job Satisfaction by Instructional Agency Level and Type of Classroom Instructor

Instructional Agency and Retention

Classroom instructors who reported very high instructional agency were more likely to intend to continue working at their current school than those who reported lower levels of agency, as shown in Figure 3. As with job satisfaction, the association between agency and retention is stronger among teachers than aides. Very high agency teachers were 24 percentage points more likely than low agency teachers (93 versus 69%) to intend to return to their current school. Among aides, this gap was 20 percentage points (92 versus 72%).

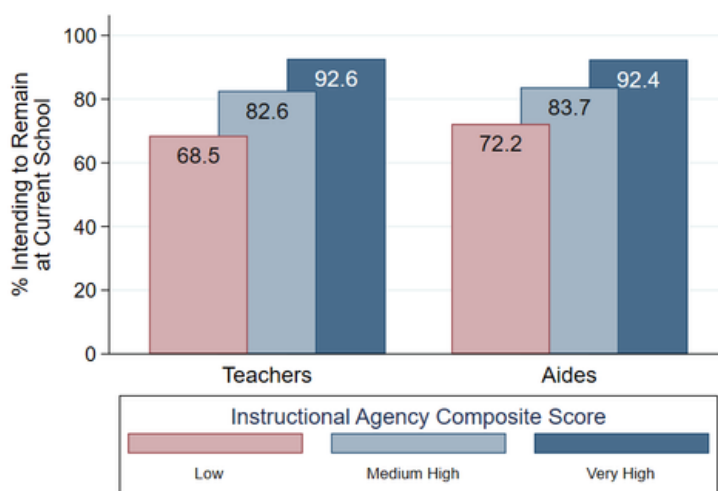


Figure 3. Percent Intending to Remain at Current School by Instructional Agency Level and Type of Classroom Instructor

Instructional Agency and School Characteristics

The first research brief in this series showed that job satisfaction and retention rates are lower in schools serving higher concentrations of Black and Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students. [3] Our findings in this brief show that job satisfaction and retention rates were higher among classroom instructors with higher levels of agency, we examined the survey responses to understand how instructional agency varied across schools serving different student populations. [3] We divided the schools into four equal-sized

groups (quartiles) based on the concentration of Black and Hispanic students or economically disadvantaged (ED) students. Our analysis found that the differences in instructional agency between teachers and aides, discussed above, were present in schools regardless of their student body's racial/ethnic or ED composition. The results also revealed no meaningful differences in agency among aides in schools with higher versus lower concentrations of Black and Hispanic or ED students.

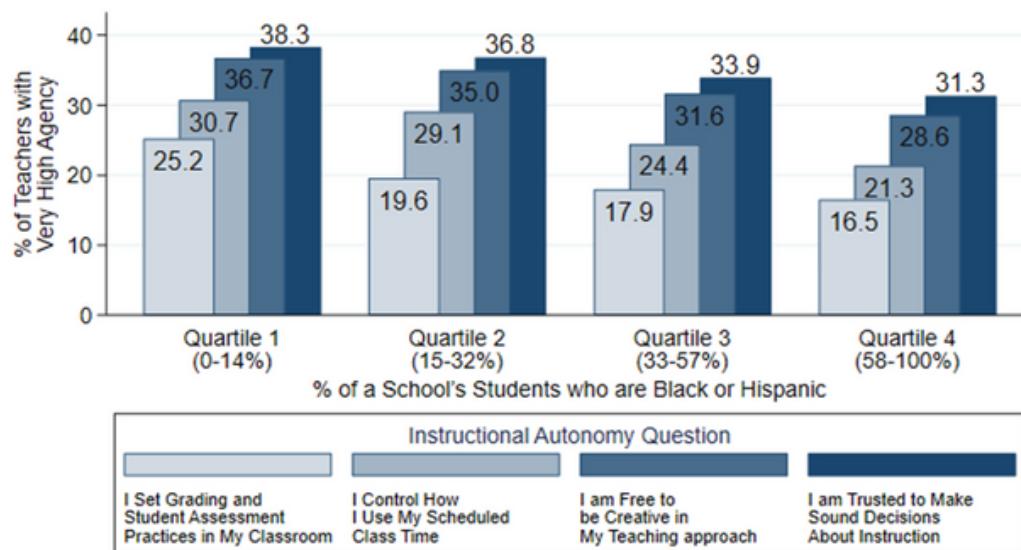


Figure 4. Percent of Teachers Expressing Very High Instructional Autonomy by Statement and the Percent of the School's Student Body that is Black or Hispanic

Teachers' instructional agency, however, did vary across schools, but only in the autonomy component. We found no differences across schools in either the respect or time components. Teachers reported meaningfully less autonomy in schools with a higher concentration of Black and Hispanic students than in schools with a lower concentration. This can be seen in Figure 4 where, for example, teachers at schools with the highest concentration were over 9 percentage points less likely than teachers at schools with the lowest concentration to have very high agency (i.e., strongly agreeing) with regard to controlling how time was spent in their classrooms (21 versus 31%). This same pattern is present in teachers' responses to the other three instructional autonomy questions with differences of between 7 and 9 percentage points. There were no meaningful differences among teachers across schools in terms of their concentration of ED students (results not shown).

Closing

This analysis, while unable to prove a causal link, suggests that providing classroom instructors with work environments that engender high instructional agency could help increase job

satisfaction and retention rates. Since most classroom instructors report less than very high instructional agency, there is room for improvement. The results of the 2021 Virginia School Survey point to the need for divisions to provide teachers with additional supports so they have sufficient planning and instructional time, feel more respected, and have greater autonomy

in the classroom. Future administrations of this survey will assist divisions in monitoring the impacts of new policies to increase classroom instructors' instructional agency. To support these local efforts, the Virginia Department of Education should offer targeted resources, support, and technical assistance.

End Notes

- [1] Hurst, C., & Brantlinger, A. (2022). Patterns in critical incidents: Understanding teacher retention through career decision making. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 109. doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103557
- [2] Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J., & Robinson, S. (2015). Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter? In R. Kneyber & J. Evers (Eds.), *Flip the System: Changing Education from the Bottom Up*. London: Routledge.
- [3] Miller, L. C., & Reynolds, A. L. (2022). *An introduction to the 2021 Virginia School Survey Research Brief Series*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia.

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