

Collaborating for Student Success Perspectives from the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher

BY A. RICHARDSON LOVE

For twenty-six years, the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher series has given voice to teachers to inform discussion about education in homes, schools, and communities. Over those years, concern for improving education has shifted from emphasizing the teacher alone to broader responsibility for student achievement shared among teachers, principals, parents, communities, and students themselves. The shift signals recognition that successful education is a collaborative venture.

Looking to a new decade, the latest MetLife survey (see Figure 1) explores collaboration specifically within schools, documenting the views of teachers, principals, and students about their roles and responsibilities, current practice, and priorities for the future. This article highlights several findings from the recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success* (2009) to illustrate its three major themes: “effective teaching and leadership,” “teaching as a career,” and “student achievement.” It identifies specific factors that educators agree would increase student achievement and concludes with an overview of MetLife Foundation support for education and how survey findings inform it.

Teaching and Leadership

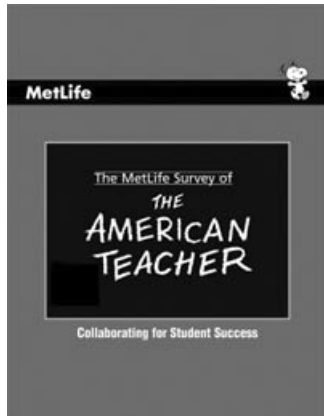
The latest MetLife survey examines how educators work and learn together to improve student achievement week to week, and how their expectations relate to student goals and responsibilities. Historically, teachers worked in autonomous, often isolated classrooms. With increased emphasis on accountability, there is new scrutiny of schoolwide performance and the progress of subgroups of students. In addition, new knowledge about learning styles and differences and the practical challenges of addressing every student need encourage teachers to help each other.

Several indicators offer perspective on attitudes about collaboration. Teachers (80 percent) and principals (90 percent) strongly agree that teachers in a school share responsibility for the achievement of all students. A smaller majority of teachers (67 percent) and principals (78 percent) believe that greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders would have a major impact on improving student achievement. Slightly fewer teachers, but still a majority of 63 percent and even more principals (84 percent), report that their school always or often structures time for teachers to collaborate.

Dedicated, structured time may be the most important resource for effective collaboration. Teachers are involved an average of 2.7 hours a week in collaboration with their colleagues, and 24 percent of teachers report more than three hours of structured time weekly for collaborating. Overall, elementary schools are more collaborative than secondary schools, but the extent varies widely among schools at both levels. The full survey report also includes views on specific collaborative activities and frequency in practice (sharing leadership, examining and discussing student work, beginning teachers working with more experienced teachers, and so on). For example, 75 percent of teachers always (41 percent) or often (34 percent) meet in teams to learn what is necessary to help students achieve at a higher level. However, only 22 percent of teachers say that teachers in their school always (8 percent) or often (14 percent) observe one another in the classroom and offer feedback, and 44 percent report this activity rarely or never happens.

Leadership also influences the quality of collaboration, both in the classroom where teachers lead and in the school where principals lead (and in varying degrees share that responsibility with teachers). Style of leadership sets a tone and can define a school culture. Overall, educators are in strong positive agreement about leadership. Teacher views are, however,

Figure 1. Cover of the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*



more mixed than those of principals and leave room for concern at the margins. For example, 51 percent of teachers strongly agree that teachers, principals, and other professionals in their school trust each other, which also means a sizeable 49 percent do not strongly agree with that view. In addition, most teachers (73 percent) report that school leaders always or often share responsibility with teachers to achieve school goals, while 27 percent say this happens sometimes, rarely, or never. Shared responsibility and trust can be significant factors in teacher satisfaction and retention, and an indication of how well colleagues work together for a common goal.

Teaching as a Career

As the changing economy and graying population exert an impact on education and communities, educators offer some interesting and encouraging perspectives. A large majority of teachers (75 percent) say they would like to continue working in education beyond traditional retirement, as a teacher mentor, administrator, tutor, or similarly. The experience and time of skilled teachers who retire from the classroom full-time could be a major additional investment to ensure greater success for the next generation of students in need.

Career changers are another valuable resource for teaching. Most principals (69 percent) and teachers (77 percent) report that they have colleagues in their schools who entered teaching from another career. More than one-third of all teachers (35 percent) report they themselves came to classroom teaching after having another career outside of education, a pattern even more prevalent for teachers in

secondary schools (45 percent) than in elementary schools (31 percent).

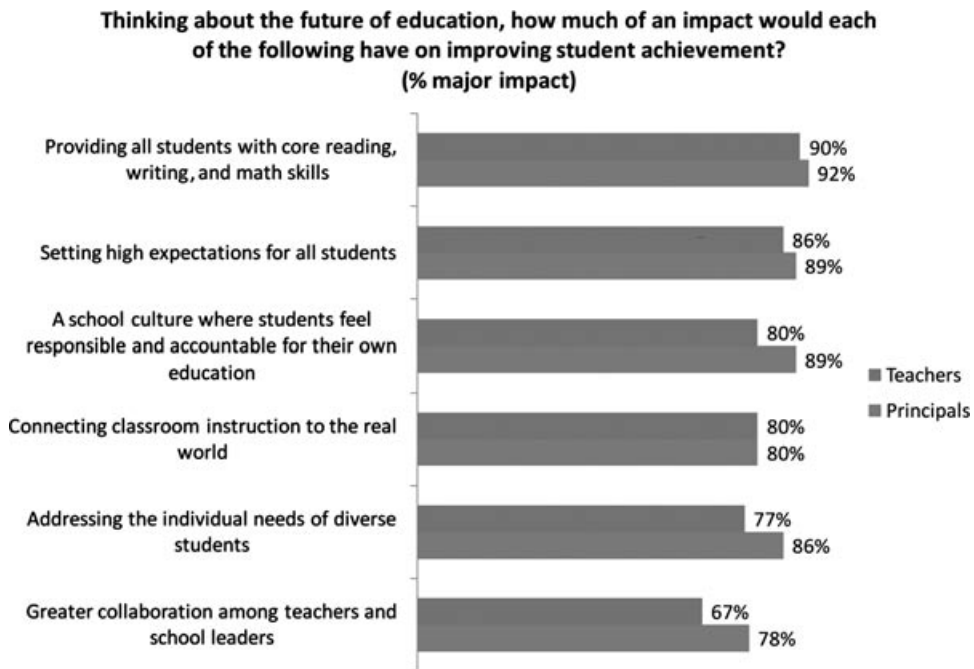
Other research adds additional perspectives on career changing and teaching. Findings in earlier surveys conducted and reported by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation with MetLife Foundation support reveal that 42 percent of college-educated Americans aged twenty-four to sixty would consider becoming a teacher. The Wilson reports also explore the pathways and experience of current teachers who made the transition in midcareer or as a second, “encore” career. This potential supply of experienced midcareer or older professionals for teaching is important in light of a continuing turnover of new teachers—as much as 50 percent in five years—and looming retirement for Baby Boomers, who represent 53 percent of the current 3.2 million teachers. It is also important to note that in the latest MetLife survey, 17 percent of teachers say they are likely to leave teaching for another occupation within the next five years, down from 27 percent in 2006, perhaps reflecting current economic concerns.

Student Achievement

The term *student success* can encompass a range of healthy intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and aesthetic development needed to build a secure, responsible, satisfying life, and the capacity for lifelong learning. The current MetLife survey looks most specifically at success in terms of academic achievement and preparation for education and work after high school. Most students across grade levels (96 percent) believe they have the responsibility to pay attention and do the work it takes to succeed in school. Most teachers (80 percent) and more principals (89 percent) believe that students feeling responsible and accountable for their own education would have a major impact on improving student achievement. Of interest, only 42 percent of teachers believe that all or most of their students have this sense of responsibility.

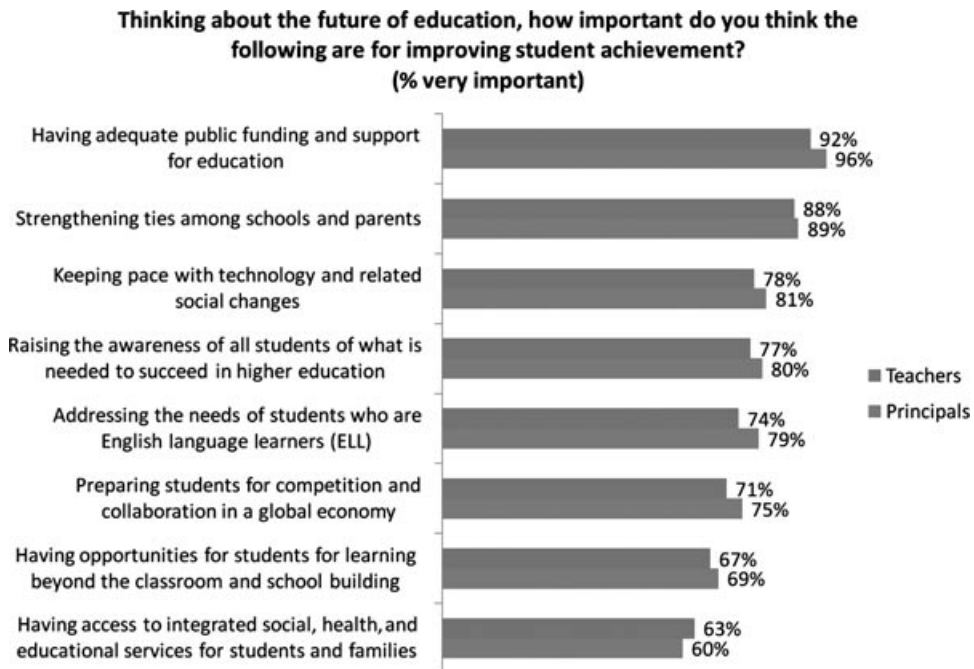
With regard to their own goals, students (95 percent) believe that it is important to go to school or college after high school in order to be prepared for work or a career, and they also expect to do so (85 percent). Their aspirations are consistent with economic projections for secure

Figure 2. Within the School: Factors with Major Impact on Improving Student Achievement



Note: Choices were “major impact,” “moderate impact,” “slight impact,” “no impact,” and “not sure.”
Source: MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success (2009).

Figure 3. Beyond the School: Factors Very Important for Improving Student Achievement



Note: Choices were “very important,” “somewhat important,” “not too important,” “not important at all,” and “not sure.”
Source: MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success (2009).

employment and prominent messages from national leaders. In contrast, teachers predict that 67 percent of their students will go on to postsecondary education, the same level that teachers predicted in the MetLife teacher survey conducted in 2000, a decade ago.

The recent MetLife survey also asked the educators to rate specific factors for their significance in improving student achievement. The first group of factors (Figure 2) includes actions largely *within* the school (setting high expectations; offering core, reading, writing, and math skills; addressing individual needs) that a large majority of teachers and principals agree would have major impact.

Community leaders who encourage collaboration may be particularly interested in the second group of factors (Figure 3), which involve significant influences *beyond the school and classroom*. It is not surprising, but significant, that both groups of educators closely agree that adequate public funding and support and strengthening ties with parents are the most important factors for increasing student achievement.

Teachers in large measure (69 percent) believe their voices are not heard in the current debate on education. MetLife Foundation President and CEO

Dennis White emphasizes: “The annual MetLife teacher survey is not just about asking, it’s also about listening. In each year’s results, we hear from those closest to the classroom about successes and opportunities, challenges and potential solutions.” The findings are shared widely with educators, policymakers, and the public, and they also inform MetLife Foundation grantmaking. The foundation supports education broadly at every stage of life through its programs in civic affairs, health, and culture. In its education program, the emphasis is specifically on increasing student achievement in public schools through effective teaching and leadership, and on student preparation for, access to, and success in higher education, particularly in the critical first year. The foundation also encourages and supports collaboration to strengthen education, and it directs funding primarily to national organizations with a local reach.

The resource list included here (see the sidebar, “Some National Resources for Local Collaboration to Increase Student Success”) identifies some MetLife Foundation grantee organizations that are addressing specific issues raised in the MetLife survey. They offer important perspectives and useful resources for educators, schools, and communities working together to increase student success.

Some National Resources for Local Collaboration to Increase Student Success

Having adequate public funding and support for education

- Public Education Network is a national organization of local education funds and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities. It has developed the Civic Index for Quality Public Schools, based on extensive opinion polling, to identify, measure, and monitor ten local community indicators found to be crucial to quality public education. (<http://civicindex4education.org>)

Strengthening ties among schools, parents, and communities

- National Civic League has recognized, documented, and shared examples of effective leadership on the part of teachers and principals to build strong school and

community relationships through the MetLife Foundation Ambassadors in Education program.

(<http://ncl.org/metlife/index.html>)

- Institute for Youth, Education, and Families of the National League of Cities has documented the experience of communities collaborating to orchestrate resources for youth development, including public schools, in an Action Kit: Creating a Youth Master Plan. (www.nlc.org/assets/fe8fc40157954b35aa6bc9c0c450d330/iyef_action_kit_youth_master_planning.pdf)
- National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University, researches, documents, and shares best practices for family and community involvement with schools and guides development of school cultures that build and sustain strong relationships. (www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/PPP/2009/index.htm)

Raising awareness of all students of what is needed to succeed in higher education

- College Summit works with schools and communities, students, and teachers to inspire and prepare a larger number of disadvantaged students for college access and success. (www.collegesummit.org/)
- Education Trust works alongside educators, parents, students, policymakers, and civic and business leaders in communities across the nation, providing practical assistance in their efforts to transform schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. (www.edtrust.org/)

Preparing students for competition and collaboration in a global economy

- Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning is building a network of districts, schools, educators, and policymakers committed to increasing global awareness through effective teaching and learning in public school classrooms. (www.asiasociety.org/education-learning/partnership-global-learning)

Having opportunities for students for learning beyond the classroom and school building

- Citizen Schools offers extended day and after-school programs to complement classroom learning by engaging middle-grade students in hands-on learning projects led by adult volunteers drawn from the community and supported by a staff of professional educators. (www.citizenschools.org)

Having access to integrated social, health, and educational services for students and families

- Communities in Schools helps students stay in school and make right choices by connecting schools, students, and families with needed community resources. (www.cisnet.org)

Tapping the supply of midcareer and encore career changers

- Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation has researched and reported on the attitudes, demographics, preparation, and experience of potential and past midcareer and later-career changers as a resource for teaching. (www.woodrow.org/news/news_items/WW_2ndCareerTeachers_0908.php)
- Jumpstart for Young Children is expanding and adapting its successful model for developing reading skills of Head Start children to include older adults, as well as college students, as mentors. (www.jstart.org)

Developing collaboration among teachers and within schools

- Center for Teaching Quality is conducting TeacherSolutions 2030, an initiative engaging a diverse group of twelve outstanding teachers across the nation as a collaborative, virtual community exploring the future of education and recommending actions to strengthen teaching and learning. (www.teachingquality.org)
- National Staff Development Council provides a range of research-based and practice-tested resources and technical assistance to help educators and schools work and learn together more effectively day-to-day to increase student achievement, including the Learning School Alliance. (www.nsd.org)

The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success* was conducted for MetLife by Harris Interactive and included 1,003 K–12 public school teachers, 500 K–12 public school principals, and 1,018 public school students in grades 3–12 surveyed in fall 2009. In addition, public school principals and teachers, as well as thought leaders in education, participated in an on-

line strategy session. To access the full survey report and a link to all past reports in the annual series, visit <http://www.metlife.com/teachersurvey>. To learn more about MetLife Foundation, visit www.metlife.org.

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