Examining Teachers' Perceptions of School Working Conditions: Analysis of Fall 2021 School Operations Survey

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Using teacher survey data across K-12 schools authorized by Grand Valley State University (GVSU), this research brief examines teachers' perceptions of school working conditions.

Key findings include:

- Eighty-six percent of teachers are satisfied with being a teacher in their school
- Thirty-nine percent of schools in the GVSU network have favorable working conditions which represents a 32 percent decline from the spring 2021 survey
- Developing strong professional connections with teachers—such as providing teachers with regular feedback, modeling effective instruction, making teachers feel comfortable raising issues—positively influences overall satisfaction.

Recommendations include:

- Highlight best practices from schools maintaining favorable working conditions
- Investigate *why* working conditions declined in a short amount of time
- Continue differentiating supports to the unique needs of individual schools

Introduction

In November 2021, the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Charter School Office (CSO) partnered with Basis Policy Research (Basis) to administer the annual School Operations Survey. The survey solicits teachers' perceptions on school culture and climate, school leadership, faculty commitment and responsibility, school resources and time use, and parent/guardian engagement. This research brief examines results from select GVSU schools meeting reporting requirements.

Research Questions

This brief examines the following research questions:

1. To what extent are teachers satisfied with working in their current school?
2. To what extent do schools have favorable working conditions?
3. What factors contribute to teachers' perceptions of satisfaction and working conditions?

Results

Drawing on data from the fall 2021 administration of the GVSU CSO School Operations Survey, Basis researchers conducted a series of descriptive and inferential analyses. Results are organized by research question below with a full description of methods provided in Appendix A.

At the conclusion of the survey window, 446 participants (30 percent) completed the survey. Basis researchers restricted the analysis to the 189 teachers working in 22 schools with at least a 50 percent response rate or who had more than 10 responses. This sample restriction reduces the degree to which school-level results are driven by a small percentage or subset of teachers. Most analyses included in this brief explore descriptive trends in the percentage of participants responding to different response options.

1 | To what extent are teachers satisfied with working in their current school?

Eighty-six percent of teachers are satisfied with being a teacher in their school.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of teachers who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" to questions gauging workplace satisfaction. Eighty-six percent of teachers working in GVSU network schools reported feeling satisfied working in their school. When we compare year-over-year responses, results suggest overall satisfaction declined by six percent in 2021. The survey also asked whether teachers like the way their school is run; 71 percent of teachers agreed with this statement, which represents a one percent increase from the previous year. The discrepancy in results between questions indicates that approximately 15 percent of teachers are satisfied working in their school even if they have less favorable opinions of school leadership.

Figure 1: Percentage of teachers who "agree" or "strongly agree" to questions about personal satisfaction

86%
Percentage of teachers **satisfied** with **being a teacher in their school.** ▼ **6%**

71%
Percentage of teachers who **like the way their school is run.** ▲ **1%**
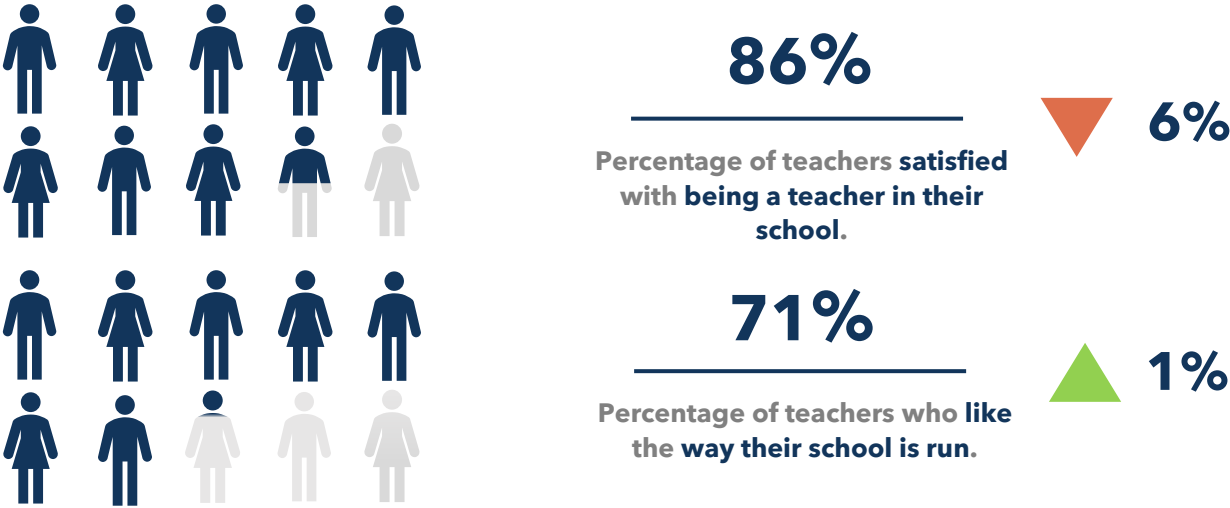
Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

2 | What percentage of schools have favorable working conditions?

To answer this research question, we aggregated teachers' responses at the school-level and applied the following scoring key to code measures discussed in this section:
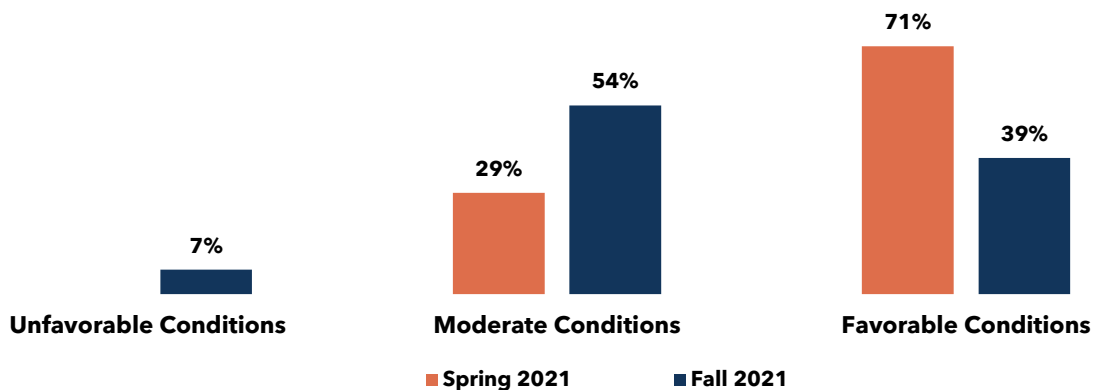
- Favorable Conditions: School Operation score exceeding 3.00
- Moderate Conditions: School Operation score between 2.50–2.99
- Unfavorable Conditions: School Operation score below 2.49

Basis researchers aggregated participants' responses across 27 survey questions to construct a school-level "working condition" score. We also constructed five sub-measures—school climate, school leadership, collective responsibility, school resources, and parent/guardian engagement— to better understand what is driving schools' working condition scores. A description of each measure is included in Appendix A.

Thirty-nine percent of schools in the GVSU network have favorable working conditions.

Figure 2 displays the percentage of schools with favorable, moderate, or unfavorable working conditions from the first two survey administrations. Thirty-nine percent of schools have favorable working conditions in fall 2021 while 54 percent have moderate working conditions. Only seven percent of schools represented in the analytic sample have unfavorable working conditions. Moreover, we sought to understand if there is a relationship between working conditions and the percentage of economically-disadvantaged (ED) or minority students served. Results from a two-sample *t*-test suggest there is no meaningful difference in schools' working condition scores for schools serving a larger percentage of ED and minority students.

Figure 2: Percentage of schools with favorable, moderate, or unfavorable working conditions

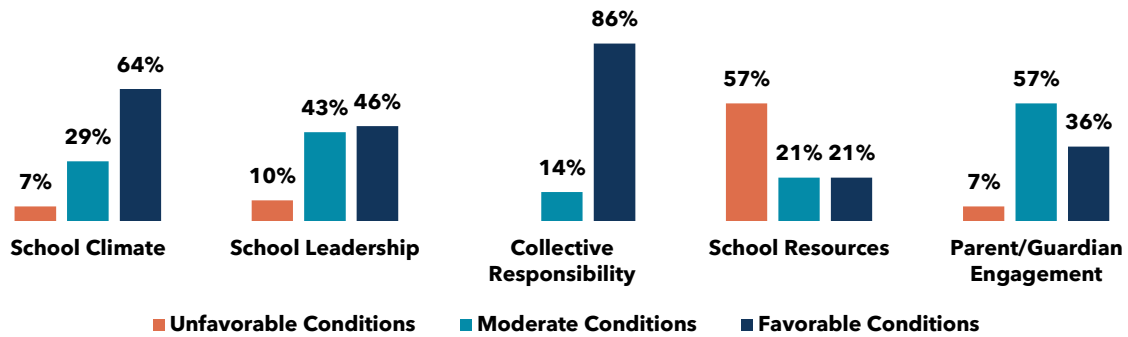Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

The percentage of schools with favorable working conditions declined by 32 percent in fall 2021.

Thirty-two percent fewer schools have favorable working in the fall as compared to the spring survey administration. Consequently, the reduction in schools with favorable working conditions resulted in a 25 percent increase in schools with moderate working conditions. Finally, results indicate a seven percent increase in schools with unfavorable working conditions from spring to fall survey administrations.

In schools with favorable working conditions, teachers report higher levels of collective responsibility and positive school climate.

Figure 3 displays the percentage of schools with favorable, moderate, or unfavorable conditions by sub-measures. Results indicate most schools have favorable collective responsibility (86 percent) and school climate (64 percent) conditions. This suggests most teachers (a) feel responsible for student learning and establishing healthy learning environments and (b) believe there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their school. In contrast, Figure 3 indicates fewer schools have favorable school resources (21 percent) or parent/guardian engagement (36 percent) conditions.

**Figure 3: Percentage of schools with favorable, moderate, or unfavorable conditions by measure**

Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

The percentage of schools with favorable school climate, school leadership, and parent/guardian engagement conditions declined by 22 to 27 percent.

Figure 4 displays the percentage of schools with favorable conditions by measure and survey administration. The percentage of schools with favorable conditions declined across all measures in fall 2021. The measures with the most precipitous drop included school leadership (27 percent decline), school climate (23 percent decline), and parent/guardian engagement (22 percent decline). Contributing to this decline includes teachers' responses to questions about whether principals know teachers' instructional strengths and areas of growth, whether students treat adults with respect at their school, and whether schools offer diverse opportunities for parents/guardians to engage with the school. In contrast, the measure of collective responsibility was mostly comparable year-over-year (five percent decline), suggesting most teachers continue to feel responsible for student learning and establishing healthy learning environments.

Figure 4: Percentage of school with favorable conditions by measure and year
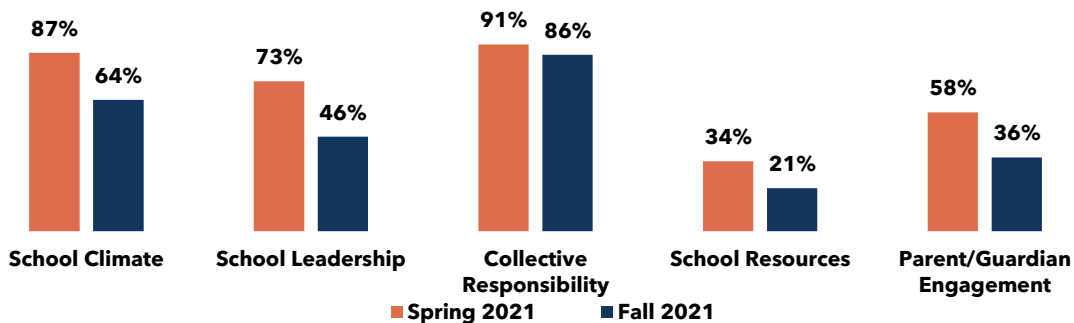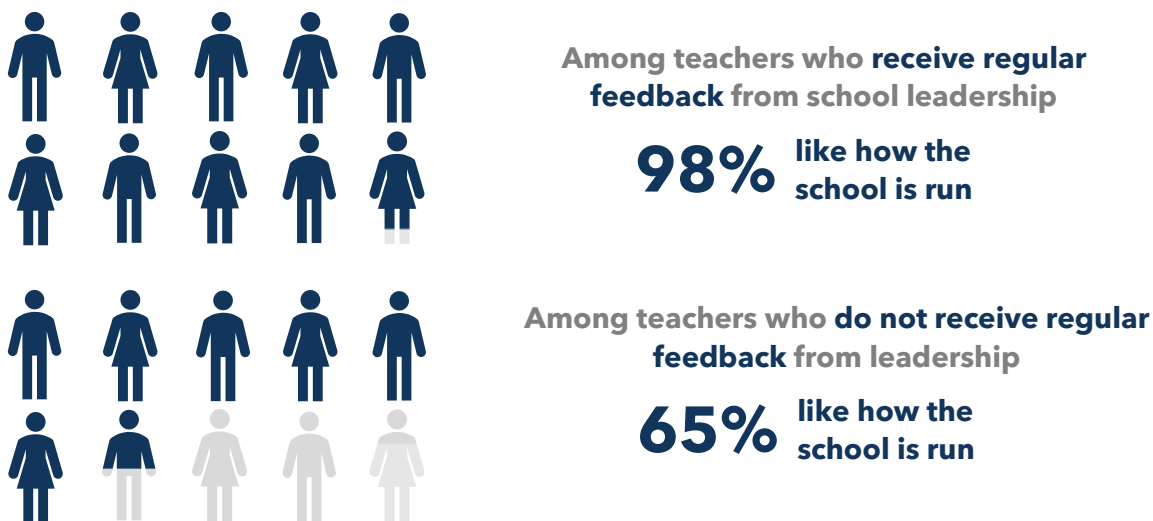

Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

3 | What factors contribute to teachers' perceptions of satisfaction and working conditions?

The professional connection instructional leaders develop with teachers positively influences teachers' satisfaction.

Professional relationships matter to teachers, and they are more likely to be satisfied working in their school and approve of the way the school is run when instructional leaders develop strong professional connections. These professional connections are formed when teachers receive regular feedback, teachers feel comfortable raising issues or concerns, and administrators model effective instruction. For instance, 57 percent of teachers report receiving regular feedback on instruction from school leadership. Of those teachers, 98 percent approve of the way things run at their school compared to 65 percent of teachers who do not receive regular feedback (see Figure 5).
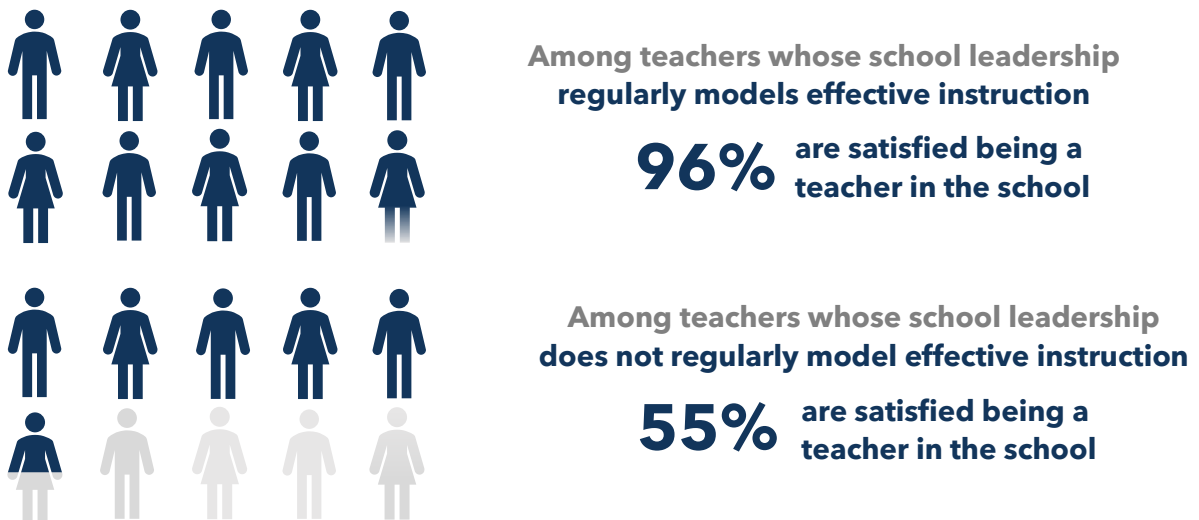
Figure 5: Percentage of teachers who like how their school is run as a function of receiving regular feedback on instruction

Among teachers who **receive regular feedback** from school leadership

98% like how the school is run

Among teachers who **do not receive regular feedback** from leadership

65% like how the school is run

Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

Moreover, 71 percent of teachers agree that school leadership regularly models effective instruction. Ninety-six percent of these teachers are satisfied with being a teacher in their current school (see Figure 6). In contrast, 55 percent of teachers who do not agree school leadership regularly models effective instruction report being satisfied working in their school. Similarly, 93 percent of teachers whose school leadership regularly models effective instruction approve of the way things are run in their school. This represents a 30 percent difference when compared to teachers who do not report school leadership regularly model effective leadership. These findings provide suggestive evidence that the relationship with instructional leaders matter more to boosting employee morale than transactional items, such as "fun" events or employee giveaways.

Figure 6: Percentage of teachers satisfied with being a teacher as a function of school leadership regularly modeling effective instruction

Among teachers whose school leadership **regularly models effective instruction**

96% are satisfied being a teacher in the school

Among teachers whose school leadership **does not regularly model effective instruction**

55% are satisfied being a teacher in the school

Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

Finally, school leaders who establish a collaborative, trustful, and open staff culture positively influence teachers' sense of satisfaction and perceptions of how their school is run. For instance, 82 percent of teachers feel comfortable raising issues or concerns with school leadership. Of these teachers, 91 percent are satisfied with being a teacher in their school while 90 percent like how the school is run (see Figure 7). In contrast, a smaller percentage of teachers are satisfied being a teacher in their school or like how their school is run when they do not feel comfortable raising issues or concerns with school leadership.

Figure 7: Percentage of teachers who like how the school is run based on how leadership handles student behavior

Among teachers **who feel comfortable** raising issues or concerns with school leadership

91% are satisfied being a teacher in the school   **90%** like how the school is run

Among teachers who do not feel comfortable raising issues or concerns with school leadership

68% are satisfied being a teacher in the school   **60%** like how the school is run
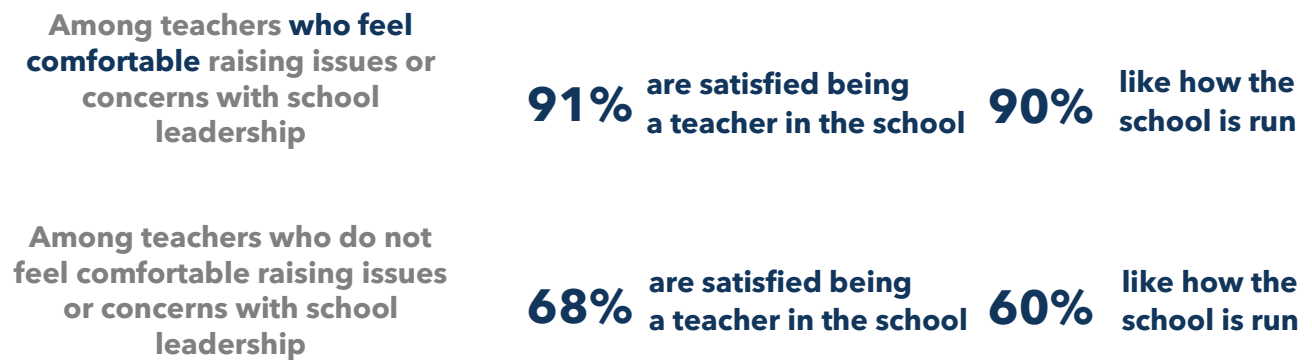
Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

Moreover, results suggest there is a positive association between teachers feeling comfortable raising issues and concerns with school leaders and the schools' professional culture. Ninety-three percent of teachers who feel comfortable raising issues or concerns report the school is a learning community in which ideas and suggestions for improvement are encouraged. In contrast, only 41 percent of teachers

who do not feel comfortable raising issues or concerns with school leadership perceive the school as a learning community where ideas and suggestions are welcomed.

Teachers need more individual and collaborative planning time.

Figure 8 displays the percentage of teachers "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" to questions addressing school resources and time use. Results suggest teachers report needing more individual and collaborative planning time. Specifically, between 43 to 48 percent of teachers report their collaborative and individual planning time is sufficient. These results are between 12 to 17 percent lower as compared to the prior survey administration. Finally, these responses contribute to the 35 percent increase in the number of schools with unfavorable school resource conditions.

Figure 8: Percentage of teachers "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" to questions addressing school resources and time use
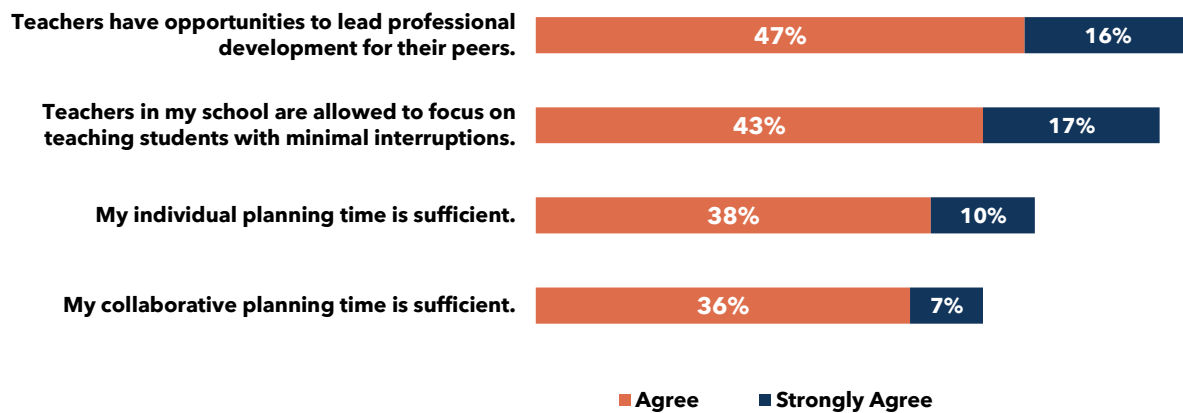
Source: GVSU CSO School Operations Survey; author's analysis

Discussion and Implications

This brief summarizes teachers' perspectives on working conditions, including school culture and climate, school leadership, faculty commitment and responsibility, school resources and time use, and parent/guardian engagement. Most teachers in the GVSU network are satisfied working in their current school (86 percent) and like the way their school is run (71 percent). Despite these positive results, only 39 percent of schools in the GVSU network have favorable working conditions, which represents a 32 percent decrease from the spring 2021 survey administration. These results are largely driven by the reduction in schools with favorable school leadership (27 percent decline), school climate (23 percent decline), and parent/engagement (22 percent decline) conditions. Contributing to these declines include teachers' responses to questions about whether principals know teachers' instructional strengths and areas of growth, whether individual or collaborative planning time is sufficient, and whether schools offer diverse opportunities for parents/guardians to engage with the school. Considering these findings, we suggest the GVSU CSO and its stakeholders consider the following three recommendations when planning future network supports.

1 | Highlight best practices from schools maintaining favorable working conditions

Multiple schools maintained favorable working conditions despite the overall decline network wide. These sites—including Covenant House Academy Detroit-Central and Hillsdale Preparatory School—would serve as useful sites to learn more about how and why they deviate from overall trends. Potential lines of inquiry include:

- How have focus schools responded to pandemic-related challenges?
- How have school leaders collaborated with faculty amid the pandemic?
- How have schools supported teachers' individual and collaborative planning time?
- How have schools responded to and engaged families amid the pandemic?
- What initiatives have schools instituted to maintain or enhance teacher satisfaction amid the pandemic?

Best practices from these schools could be shared network wide to strengthen institutional knowledge on how schools promote positive working conditions for faculty.

2 | Investigate *why* working conditions declined in a short amount of time

Working conditions in seven schools declined from the spring to fall survey administrations. Given that responses deteriorated in a short amount of time, it will be important to investigate *why* the precipitous drop occurred. A prevailing assumption is the decline is attributed to the pandemic but focusing exclusively on a singular factor precludes (1) a robust exploration of alternative explanations and (2) the integration of strategies that meet the diverse needs of individual schools. We recommend district and school leaders consider and reflect on a multitude of factors that would contribute to a decline in working conditions. Alternatively, the CSO and district leaders could conduct focus groups with faculty from different grade-levels and content areas to better understand the change that occurred within select schools. Insights from these focus groups would help the CSO and district leaders provide more tailored support to meet the needs of respective schools.

3 | Continue differentiating supports to the unique needs of individual schools

The GVSU CSO could review a breakdown of the measures in the survey by schools included in the analytic sample and thus meeting the reporting threshold. Results will provide the GVSU CSO with insights into strengths and areas for improvement for each school. Moreover, the GVSU CSO can further review how schools score on individual questions identifying areas of strength and areas needing improvement. Insights from this analysis support the GVSU CSO in tailoring supports to the unique needs of the respective schools.

Appendices

Appendix A: Methods

Data Sources. This research brief draws on data from the fall 2021 administration of the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Charter School Office (CSO) School Operations Survey. The survey includes validated items from the annual Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) Educator Survey. Basis researchers selected items addressing school culture and climate, perceptions of school leadership, school resources and time use, and parent/guardian engagement. We then shared the survey items with GVSU CSO leadership for review and approval. See Appendix C for a copy of the survey instrument. Basis researchers administered the survey through Qualtrics.

Sample. Basis researchers distributed survey invitations to 1,474 full-time teachers working in 76 K-12 schools authorized by the GVSU CSO. At the conclusion of the survey window, 446 participants (30 percent) completed the entire survey. See Appendix B for school response rates. We further restricted our analytic sample to the 189 teachers working in 22 schools with at least a 50 percent response rate or who had more than 10 teacher responses. This sample restriction reduces the degree to which school-level results are driven by a small percentage or subset of teachers.

Measures. In this section, we describe the focal measures used in this research brief. We used five survey measures—school climate, school leadership, collective responsibility, school resources, and parent/guardian engagement—previously identified from research using the TDOE Educator Survey. Each measure is discussed below.
School Operations. The school operations score represents the mean score across all survey items. Questions used in this measure are included in Q1-5 in Appendix C.

School Climate. Survey items address teachers feeling satisfied being a teacher in this school, having a sense of trust and mutual respect in this school, teachers recommending this school to parents/guardians, and students treat adults with respect at this school. Questions used in this measure are included in Q1, A-G in Appendix C.

School Leadership. This measure includes survey items addressing leadership communicating a vision for this school, teachers feeling satisfied with the way things are run at this school, and leadership being knowledgeable about curricula being used. Questions used in this measure are included in Q1 G, Q2 A-H in Appendix C.

Collective Responsibility. Survey items address teachers feeling responsible when students fail, teachers feeling responsible to help each other do their best, and teachers taking responsibility for improving their school. Questions used in this measure are included in Q3, A-D in Appendix C.

School Resources. This measure includes survey items addressing teachers having time to focus on teaching with minimal disruptions, having sufficient planning time, and having opportunities to lead professional development for their peers. Questions used in this measure are included in Q4, A-D in Appendix C.

Parent/Guardian Engagement. Survey items address the school regularly communicating with parents/guardians, teachers feeling supported by parents/guardians, and the school offering opportunities

for parents/guardians to participate in planning, leadership, and volunteering. Questions used in this measure are included in Q5, A-C in Appendix C.

Moreover, Basis researchers aggregated schools' scores across respective measures and applied the following scoring key to classify schools' conditions:

- Favorable Conditions – School Operation score exceeding 3.00
- Moderate Conditions – School Operation score between 2.50–2.99
- Unfavorable Conditions – School Operation score below 2.49

Analytic Strategy. Basis researchers conducted a series of descriptive analyses to answer the research questions. We primarily explored descriptive statistics to report on the distribution of scores across schools and measures.

Appendix B: School response rates

Table B1: Survey invitations and response rates by GVSU charter school

School Name	Responses	Invites	% Responses
Achieve Charter Academy	5	30	23%
Adams-Young Academy	10	18	61%
Arbor Academy	4	10	50%
Black River Public School Elementary	6	23	30%
Black River Public School Middle/High	16	34	56%
Canton Preparatory High School	10	27	37%
Chandler Woods Charter Academy	10	34	29%
Cornerstone Jefferson-Douglass Academy	4	25	24%
Covenant House Academy Detroit - Central	6	7	86%
Covenant House Academy Detroit - East	2	5	40%
Covenant House Academy Detroit - Southwest	1	4	25%
Covenant House Academy Grand Rapids	6	10	70%
Crossroads Charter Academy Elementary	6	14	43%
Crossroads Charter Academy Middle/High	5	14	50%
Detroit Achievement Academy	3	14	29%
Detroit Enterprise Academy	2	30	7%
Detroit Merit Charter Academy	7	28	25%
Detroit Premier Academy	6	28	21%
Detroit Prep	1	20	5%
Eagle's Nest Academy	1	3	33%
East Arbor Charter Academy	7	25	32%
Endeavor Charter Academy	6	27	30%
Excel Charter Academy	9	35	26%
Flint Cultural Center Academy	1	19	5%
Forest Academy	1	2	50%
Francis Street Primary School	1	3	33%
Global Heights Academy	4	17	29%
Grand River Academy	1	30	3%
Grand River Preparatory High School	9	22	45%
Hanley International Academy	6	30	23%
Hillsdale Preparatory Academy	4	8	63%
Kalamazoo Covenant Academy	2	2	100%
Knapp Charter Academy	3	27	11%
Legacy Charter Academy	0	34	0%
Light of the World Academy	3	11	36%
Lincoln-King Adams-Young Academy High School (Grove)	6	20	35%
Lincoln-King Adams-Young Academy High School (Scholastica)	5	16	38%
Madison-Carver Academy	7	18	39%
Martin Luther King Jr. Education Center Academy	1	10	10%
Metro Charter Academy	3	23	17%
Michigan Mathematics and Science Academy (Dequidre)	15	35	51%
Michigan Mathematics and Science Academy (Lorraine)	6	17	35%
Muskegon Covenant Academy	3	6	67%
New Paradigm College Prep	2	5	40%
New Paradigm Glazer Academy	0	1	0%
New Paradigm Loving Academy	0	1	0%
Oakland Academy	5	10	50%
Old Mission Peninsula School	5	15	40%

Paragon Charter Academy	7	31	26%
PrepNet Virtual Academy	9	32	28%
Reach Charter Academy	5	29	21%
Saginaw Covenant Academy	4	4	100%
South Canton Scholars Charter Academy	9	31	29%
Taylor Preparatory High School	5	12	33%
The Greenspire High School	1	6	33%
The Greenspire School	6	9	67%
Timberland Charter Academy	10	37	32%
University Prep Science and Math Elementary	4	16	25%
University Prep Science and Math High School	9	16	50%
University Prep Science and Math Middle School	9	19	47%
University Preparatory Art & Design Elementary	2	12	17%
University Preparatory Art & Design Middle/High	8	26	31%
University Preparatory Elementary - Ellen Thompson	2	16	13%
University Preparatory Elementary - Mark Murray	9	18	61%
University Preparatory High School	7	19	37%
University Preparatory Middle School	6	24	29%
Vanderbilt Charter Academy	9	22	41%
Vanguard Charter Academy	2	35	11%
WMAAA	17	33	55%
Walker Charter Academy	6	35	17%
Warrendale Charter Academy	7	31	23%
Washington-Parks Academy	3	18	22%
Westfield Charter Academy	10	25	44%
Westfield Preparatory High School	4	25	16%
William C. Abney Academy	6	22	27%
Windemere Park Charter Academy	3	24	13%
CSO Network	446	1474	30%

Appendix C: Survey instrument

1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within this school.	1	2	3	4
B. I am generally satisfied with being a teacher in this school.	1	2	3	4
C. I would recommend this school to parents/guardians seeking a place for their child.	1	2	3	4
D. Our school staff is a learning community in which ideas and suggestions for improvement are encouraged.	1	2	3	4
E. Students treat adults with respect at this school.	1	2	3	4
F. Students in my school are safe from bullying.	1	2	3	4
G. I feel prepared to respond to any type of emergency situation that may occur at my school.	1	2	3	4
H. Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	1	2	3	4

2. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding school leadership in your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. The principal at my school communicates a clear vision for this school.	1	2	3	4
B. I feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to me with school leaders.	1	2	3	4
C. I like the way things are run at this school.	1	2	3	4
D. My principal regularly models effective instruction.	1	2	3	4
E. My principal regularly gives feedback on my instruction.	1	2	3	4
F. My principal knows my instructional strengths and areas of growth.	1	2	3	4
G. My principal is knowledgeable about the curricula being used.	1	2	3	4
H. School leadership effectively handles student discipline and behavioral problems.	1	2	3	4

3. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the teachers at your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. Teachers at my school feel responsible when students fail.	1	2	3	4
B. Teachers at my school feel responsible to help each other do their best.	1	2	3	4
C. Teachers at my school help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classroom.	1	2	3	4
D. Teachers at my school take responsibility for improving their school.	1	2	3	4

4. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding teacher workload at your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. Teachers in my school are allowed to focus on teaching students with minimal interruptions.	1	2	3	4
B. My individual planning time is sufficient.	1	2	3	4
C. My collaborative planning time is sufficient.	1	2	3	4
D. Teachers have opportunities to lead professional development for their peers.	1	2	3	4

5. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding teacher/parent/guardian relations at your school.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A. This school regularly communicates with parents/guardians about how they can help their children learn.	1	2	3	4
B. I feel supported by the parents/guardians of my students.	1	2	3	4
C. This school offers an array of opportunities for parents/guardians to participate in school planning, leadership, and volunteering.	1	2	3	4

About This Report

This research was conducted by Basis Policy Research. Basis conducts applied public policy research, primarily in the field of education; provides technical assistance to state departments of education, districts, and schools; and supports policymakers by providing the data they need to make sound decisions. For more information visit our website at www.basispolicyresearch.com.