

Nelson County School Board responds to teacher morale survey

Emma Martin

Jan 20, 2022



The entrance to Nelson Middle School is pictured.

Nick Cropper

The mission of the Nelson County Education Association is to advocate for Nelson County Public Schools employees. NCEA recently conducted a teacher morale survey — results suggest that teachers need advocating for now more than ever.

Survey respondents echoed the same symptoms that educators across the nation are experiencing: severe fatigue, stress and burnout related to overwork, teacher turnover and ever-evolving pandemic challenges. NCEA board members presented the results and suggested possible solutions to the Nelson County School Board during its Jan. 13 meeting.

The NCEA survey asked teachers to rate the frequency of their work-related stress and anxiety from a scale of one to 10, with one representing no stress and 10 representing a teacher experiencing work-related stress every day. Among the 79 teachers at Tye River Elementary, Nelson Middle School, Rockfish Elementary School and Nelson County High School who responded to the survey, an average score was 8.5 out of 10.

Average responses to questions “Has work-related stress made you consider leaving public education?” and “Has work-related stress made you consider leaving Nelson County Public Schools?” were 6.5 out of 10 and 7.25 of 10 on the same scale, respectively.

NCEA president and Tye River Elementary third grade teacher Rebecca Allen told the board that the survey was meant to give teachers a way to voice their concerns. Allen hopes that the survey will lead to improvements and greater communication between

teachers and administrators.

“Our employees want to be able to work alongside the school board and our administration,” Allen said.

The NCEA survey also addressed an extreme workload that Allen and NCEA vice president Phillip Kershner said is only increasing.

“We still have pre-COVID expectations, plus COVID expectations that we’re trying to maintain or meet even though the times are totally different in terms of what we’re able to do and what we’re working with,” Allen told the Nelson County Times after the meeting.

She described a recent scenario in which three of the 18 students in her class were out for the week. She had to make time to contact parents and forward missed work outside of school hours — time that Allen says is packed with meetings, lesson planning and administrative work.

Kershner, a choir teacher at Nelson County’s middle and high schools, expressed similar frustration with long hours and what the NCEA describes as “tasks that inefficiently use up scarce planning time.”

“When you’re working with students you can’t do all the paperwork that’s expected,” Kershner told the Nelson County Times, adding: “This is my fourth day this week here staying at work after 8 p.m.”

“We signed up to be with kids, to educate kids, to make a difference in a child’s life and education,” Allen said. “The whole system needs to change because it’s a lot about student performance and data keeping and record keeping and fulfilling all the requirements, but in order to do that you’re taking away from the teacher’s time to implement effective lessons.”

Allen referenced a national “teacher crisis” in her presentation to the board and later told the Nelson County Times, “We have so many seasoned teachers that are leaving and we’re seeing trickle down effects of how it’s affecting the current teachers here.”

The morale survey asked teachers how much time they spend working outside their workday to meet the expectations and requirements of their position. Of respondents, 14.3% spent one to three hours a week, 31.2% spent four to six hours, 14.3% spend seven to nine hours and 31.2% of respondents spent over 10 hours a week working outside their workday.

Allen categorized her overtime workload as over 10 hours a week beyond school hours. “Teachers never work 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. I walk in the door at 7:30 a.m. at school. I never leave before 5 p.m. I go home, probably have an hour and a half to two hours of downtime, and then I open my computer between 8 and 9 p.m. and work till 11 p.m. every night.”

Allen said she feels that these hours are what it takes for her to be an effective teacher.

Allen and Kershner acknowledge positive changes in motion, however.

“We’re already starting this process to help out our staff address the mental health and the stress,” Allen said.

She pointed to Acting Superintendent Joseph Cox’s intention to develop a superintendent’s advisory team that would include educator representatives.

“I think it’s so important for a superintendent to meet every student in the school division, to meet every teacher in the school division, every staff member,” Cox said at the Jan. 13 meeting, the first at which he was in the role of superintendent. “I’m looking forward to getting to staff meetings, I hope in the next two weeks, just to maybe introduce myself.”

The upcoming 2022-23 budget includes a planned 5% salary increase for teachers and administrators with an added seniority salary increase of 0.5% between seniority steps. The budget also reinstates a tuition reimbursement to cover the cost of classes that teachers take to keep their teaching licenses.

NCEA officers met with Cox on Jan. 12 for an initial meeting, to repeat monthly, and began addressing problems the group identified for the board.

“I appreciate you all presenting this because we’ve got to all be on the same side,” School Board Vice Chair Shannon Powell said. “We gotta be on the same team and moving forward as a group for everybody to succeed and at the end of the day for our kids to be taken care of and educated well.”

Allen said that she is advocating for change because she’s passionate about her work and loves what she does.

“We want to provide a work environment where teachers are here, they come here and then they stay here,” Allen told the board. “They are invested in our community and stay to offer our students with the best education that we can provide.”

NELSON COUNTY

Nelson supervisors' approval of budget with less school funding causes conflict at school board meeting

Emma Martin
Jul 1, 2022

Tension between the Nelson County School Board and Board of Supervisors over a recent budget increase rollback led to a confrontation after a school board meeting that a sheriff's deputy stepped in to help handle.

Immediately after Tuesday's meeting, as school board and audience members were dispersing, board of supervisors chair Jesse Rutherford — seated in the audience to observe the meeting — approached the school board's table. School Board member Ceaser Perkins approached within inches of Rutherford's face and did not step away when Rutherford asked him to.

Rutherford said in a phone interview the morning after the meeting he had offered Perkins a handshake, which Perkins refused, saying, "Don't shake my hand."

"A cordial hello escalated into physical intimidation with Ceaser Perkins refusing to step down," Rutherford said, adding it took the intervention of multiple members of the school board and Deputy Brad Dingman to allow him to leave the room. He confirmed he was escorted by a sheriff's deputy out of the building and to his car.

Perkins could not be reached for comment.

After the meeting, Dingman said deputies would file a report. Rutherford said Thursday he did not intend to press charges.

The source of the dispute is the board of supervisors' final budget, approved and appropriated at a June 27 meeting. At the meeting, supervisors voted to approve a budget without an additional \$1 million in school funding that supervisors had committed at a June 14 meeting via a motion where Supervisor Tommy Harvey was the deciding affirmative vote.

Harvey said at the June 14 meeting he was "ready to dip in" to the county's nonrecurring revenue to fund the additional million to the schools and that the school board had justified its request. The vote brought the county's total education contribution for fiscal year 2023 to \$18.1 million, \$2.5 million over fiscal year 2022 funding.

The school board met June 16 to revise its fiscal year 2023 budget based on the additional \$1 million in local funding. Assistant Superintendent for Administration Shannon Irvin told the school board the new funds could be used to establish a \$17 minimum wage for support staff, with new salary increases between seniority and responsibility-based steps.

Irvin also outlined adjustments to teachers' salaries made possible with the additional million: a 0.5% salary increase between seniority steps and salary adjustments for teachers who've been with the division for 20 years or longer. Irvin emailed all Nelson County Public Schools employees June 17 to tell them about these tentative changes to the division's budget, pending the board of supervisors' final approval and appropriation of its budget.

But then, on June 27, Harvey voted yes to Supervisor David Parr's motion that the board approve a 2022-2023 budget without the additional \$1 million, reverting back to the \$1.5 million school funding increase.

Supervisor Ernie Reed objected after Parr's motion, citing parliamentary procedure and saying his understanding was that the board could not rescind a motion at a continued meeting — the June 27 meeting was a continuation of the board's June 14 meeting.

County Attorney Philip Payne clarified the board could move to adopt the budget with the amendment, and the board did so, with Harvey, Rutherford and Parr voting yes and Reed and Supervisor Skip Barton voting no.

Barton raised his voice to ask Harvey what had changed his mind, and Harvey's response was inaudible to the audience.

In a phone interview Friday, Barton, who sat next to Harvey at the meeting, said Harvey had responded, "I changed my mind."

Barton said he was surprised at the outcome of the meeting but had foreseen the possibility that the money could be revoked.

"I think the school needs that \$1 million," Barton said in the interview. "I was not happy with what occurred."

Harvey could not be reached for comment.

At the school board's June 28 meeting to approve the schools' budget, Irvin said the decision to revert school funding back to \$1.5 million over the 2022 budget means the division will establish a \$15 hourly minimum wage instead of \$17 for support staff.

She said the board had identified seven positions "that will no longer be there for next year," allowing the board to make some planned salary enhancements including a 0.5% increase between seniority steps for both the support staff and teacher salary scales, and increases for teachers at the 20-, 25- and 30-year experience steps — making those steps match the 25th highest salaries in the state this year but not the anticipated 25th highest salaries in the state for next year as planned.

She confirmed all division full-time employees still will receive a 5% raise and a \$1,000 bonus in December 2022. Irvin said a \$75,000 cut to the transportation budget achieved by switching to a single evening bus route could allow the division to award part-time employees a partial bonus in December and the board unanimously approved the change.

"I'm just tired of sitting here, spending eight months of our time talking about the budget and it really just comes down to what they're going to give us," Perkins said after Irvin's update.

He added efforts to "play nice" and "be professional" were not reciprocated with the board of supervisors.

“Some of the things that go on are borderline unethical in my opinion ... We thank the other board for what they do and if they have any issue with the way we spend their money, you can always have an audit,” Perkins said. “Please do so, if you think we are bad stewards of your money, as you call it.”

Watch Now: Nelson FFA students lead a farming field day for elementary schoolers

Emma Martin
Apr 5, 2022



Eleventh-grader Houston Bryant talks to fourth-grade students about chickens as livestock during Nelson County High School's Food for America event hosted by the FFA on April 1.

Kendall Warner, Nelson County Times

Tye River and Rockfish River elementary schoolers recently enjoyed a variety of agriculture and education activities thanks to the Nelson County High School FFA chapter. Fourth graders from eight classes met farm animals, planted tomatoes and made their own butter and cups of edible soil at stations organized and taught by FFA students.

At the livestock station, FFA students Houston Bryant and Daniel Campbell showed hogs, sheep, cattle and chickens to fourth graders eager to pet a hen's downy feathers and answer Bryant's questions about what cuts of chicken they eat.

At the Farm Equipment Safety station, Chris Bryant of James River Equipment represented the farming vehicles he loaned to the chapter for the event. Chris Bryant said he partnered with the chapter because it's important to educate a new generation of farmers about the equipment they're going to be using.

"Equipment is such an important part of agriculture," Lily Folley said.

Folley is an FFA senior student at NCHS. She said helping lead the "build a burger" station at the FFA's last Food for America event inspired her interest in agriculture education. Folley will attend Virginia Tech in the fall and plans to major in elementary education.

She explained the purpose of the Food for America event is to educate younger students about where food comes from while advocating for farmers.

“A lot of people underestimate farmers and what they do,” she said.

Folley and junior FFA student Sydney Ellis were members of a committee that planned the April 1 event. Ellis said FFA students had been organizing since early February and borrowed some station ideas from the chapter’s last Food for America event but updated them for today’s elementary schoolers.

NCHS Agricultural Science teacher and FFA advisor Cole Ramsey explained Food for America is a national curriculum and program.

“Our kids have taken the idea and the formatting of it and made it their own,” he said.

FFA stands for Future Farmers of America, but Ramsey said most of his students don’t graduate directly into a farming career. Instead many enter the workforce in industries related to agriculture or pursue farming-related degrees such as agricultural or environmental science and agricultural business.

“Our students leave with a skill set. Whether they go into nursing or whether they go into business or other careers not related to agriculture, they’re leading with that set of leadership skills: event planning, how to run a meeting and how to speak in front of people,” Ramsey said.

Ramsey has taught agriculture production at NCHS for five years. Farming and education run in the family: Ramsey, whose father was an agriculture teacher, was raised on a cattle farm and has been involved with FFA “pretty much from birth,” showing sheep, cattle and pigs at livestock shows.

Ramsey said his classes are “so experiential.” In NCHS agriculture and horticulture classes, students learn how to start and tend a plant, harvest a crop and raise sheep and pigs.

“We have four ewes and a ram. The students manage that whole flock as part of their classes, everything from shots and vaccines to feeding to marketing the lambs when they’re done. They handle it all,” he said.

Ramsey was proud of his students on April 1, but his pride extends throughout the school year.

“I teach the best students at Nelson County High School, hands down, and I tell anybody that,” Ramsey said. “It’s a sign over my door in my classroom. The group of kids that we have to work with, they come in as great kids and they leave as great leaders.”

Ramsey said he will work with the same group of students from middle school up through graduation through FFA and his classes.

“It’s like a family that’s not your family. It’s one backbone thing that will never change. You always have those people to back you up,” Ellis said of FFA.

She’s interested in pursuing either agricultural education or welding when she graduates.

“I want to be able to do that for other kids in the future,” she said.