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# **SUMMARY** OF FINDINGS

From a Survey of Teachers and Staff in  
Douglas County School District

Prepared by Strategies 360  
April 13, 2015

# Methodology

The Douglas County Federation (DCF) commissioned Strategies 360 to conduct an online survey of teachers, staff, and administrators in the Douglas County School District (DCSD). Interviews were conducted February 23<sup>rd</sup> through March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015. DCF staff hand-distributed invitations to nearly 3,000 teachers, as well as nearly 2,000 classified personnel across the district. In total, 800 respondents participated in the survey, 698 of whom are certified teaching staff from the preschool through the high school level. The remaining 102 respondents represent classified support, custodial, and office staff, as well as administrative staff. All respondents were assured of complete anonymity and no personal information was tracked or collected.

Because the sample is not necessarily statistically representative of the full population of teachers and staff in DCSD, we cannot assign a traditional margin of error to the data. However, a sample size of 800 teachers and staff is robust enough to make well-informed assessments about attitudes across the district.

S360 took a number of steps to ensure a high level of security and quality control for the survey. Each potential respondent was given unique access to the

online platform through a distinct passcode that could only be used once. These passcodes were distributed only to DCSD teachers and staff. Control questions were added to the survey in order to screen out low-quality responses. Finally, only S360 staff were able to administer the data collection process; DCF simply had access to the final results.

### ABOUT STRATEGIES 360

Strategies 360 is one of the West’s largest and most successful research and public affairs firms, with more combined expertise in opinion research, communications, and public relations than any western firm. Based in Denver, our independent, non-partisan research practice is trusted by some of the country’s leading public agencies, businesses, and advocacy organizations to help navigate complex public opinion environments with data-driven strategy and informed message development. S360’s research is nationally recognized for its accuracy and insight. Our team’s research and analysis has been featured in such respected media outlets as *The New York Times*, *Associated Press*, *Washington Post*, *The National Journal*, and *Politico*.

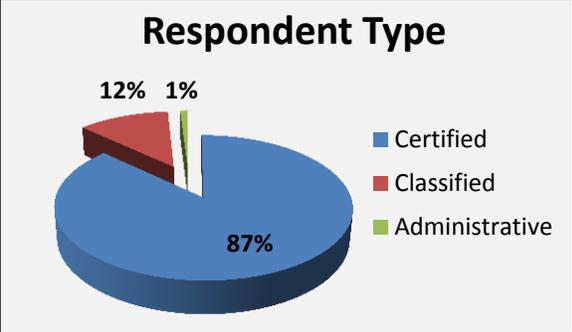
Research Goals
▪ Assess perceptions of the district’s overall performance, trajectory, and efficacy at supporting students and teachers
▪ Gauge satisfaction with working conditions, administrative support, and opportunities for growth
▪ Explore opportunities for collaboration with other teachers and staff
▪ Evaluate attitudes towards supervisors and the transparency with which decisions are made that affect teachers and staff

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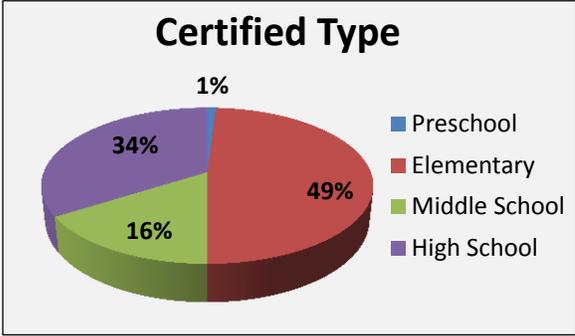
# Introduction

The survey examined attitudes of both certified employees (i.e. teachers, counselors, social workers, etc.) and classified staff in the district, though certified employees comprised the bulk of our sample.

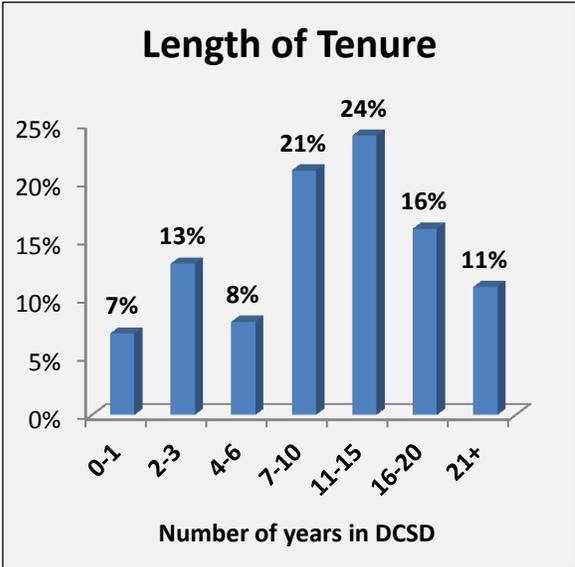


All respondents, regardless of employee type, answered a set of common questions. However, respondents also received a number of questions specific to their employee type (certified or classified/administrative) in order to make the content more relevant. The attitudes of these two respondent groups tended to be more similar than different, though some notable differences emerged and are highlighted in greater detail later in this report.

Of those who identified themselves as certified, roughly half teach at the elementary level. High school and middle school teachers are also well represented in the data.



We also attracted responses from across the spectrum in terms of length of employment in DCSD, including more than 150 responses from teachers and staff with three years or less in DCSD, nearly 100 responses from those who have spent 21 years or longer in the district, and a wide variety of responses in between.



# Key Findings

## By nearly any measure, morale has fallen across the board—even beyond the record lows measured in 2012.

Standard measures of employee morale and satisfaction—including questions about the direction of the school district, the district’s efforts to create an atmosphere in which every child can succeed, and the extent to which the district values and supports its staff—registered startling levels of dissatisfaction. Across six questions used to gauge teacher morale, all six uncovered all-time lows since they were initially introduced in DCSD and DCF surveys dating back to 2005.

## This deeply-rooted dissatisfaction with district administration and priorities is not sustainable.

Frustration is palpable—and intense—nearly across the board. Since 2012 alone, faith in the district’s trajectory, climate, and culture has plummeted. In fact, disillusionment is so high that it will be very difficult to eclipse current levels in the future.

## These are not token sentiments; teachers report a greater likelihood and desire to leave the district than ever before.

In 2015, a *majority* of teachers say they are “highly likely” to leave DCSD if given the opportunity to gain employment in another school district. Many went on to explain that they are actively seeking these opportunities and some even suggested their experiences have cemented a desire to leave the teaching profession altogether.

## While teachers and staff have a number of grievances, a handful of objections rise to the top:

- Fewer than 10% agree that the reforms implemented by the current district leadership have resulted in increased learning for students.
- Three quarters of teachers and more than seven in ten staff feel that current DCSD policies do not encourage them to collaborate with each other.
- Less than one quarter feel satisfied with their working conditions.
- An overwhelming 95% of teachers do not support the district’s “Pay for Performance” or “World Class Targets” approach to compensation.
- Ninety percent do not have confidence in Dr. Elizabeth Celia-Fagen as DCSD superintendent.

*“I began my career 24 years ago and love my content area. However, due to recent changes in district policies and expectations, I would like to quit teaching altogether. Because I am nearing the end of my career and cannot afford a pay cut if I were to switch districts, I am going to “tough it out.” Even though I was rated as highly effective last year, I feel less effective than ever before. I have resorted to coming in to school on weekends to make lesson plans and to complete “evidence” for CITE. I estimate that I spend 70+ hours per week working. I have never been more unhappy.”*

# Perceptions of the District

District Climate Statements			
Statements	Total Disagree	Strong Disagree	Change Since 2012
The climate and culture in our district make for a positive work environment.*	96%	73%	+33%
I believe the school board has a positive public image.	95%	74%	n/a
I believe the district is moving in a positive direction.*	94%	69%	+19%
I feel the district admin. and systems support my work in the classroom/work site.*	92%	64%	+23%
I feel valued as a district employee.*	91%	67%	+18%
Communication between the district and my school/site supports student learning.*	89%	48%	+26%
I believe DCSD has a positive public image.	89%	53%	n/a
DCSD provides an atmosphere in which every child can succeed.*	72%	33%	+23%

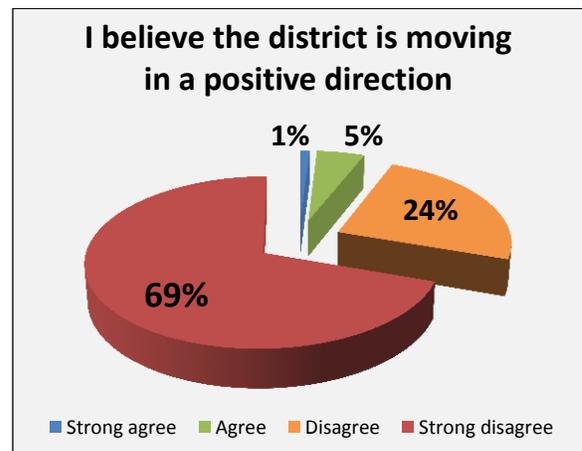
\*Questions that have been asked in previous surveys.

"Change since 2012" measures the difference in 'strongly disagree' values since the same questions were asked in 2012.

## DISTRICT ATMOSPHERE

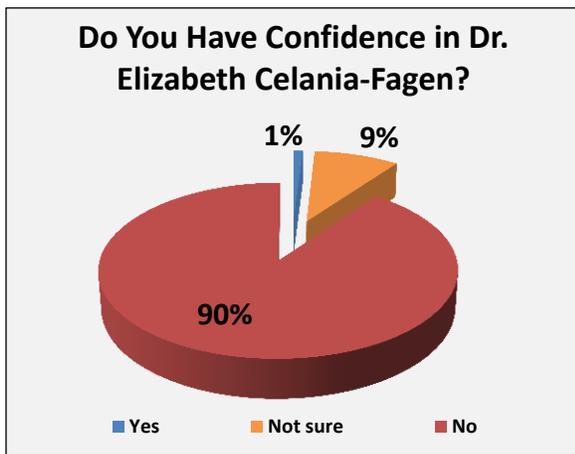
The culture, climate, and direction of DCSD are increasingly perceived as toxic by the district's teachers and staff. In order to explore a variety of facets of the relationship between district administrators and district teachers and staff, we tested eight different statements (see left). **Six of these eight statements have been tested in multiple iterations of this survey in past years. Of those, all six registered all-time high levels of discontent.**

Perhaps most indicative of the troubled relationship between the district administration and its employees, 94% of respondents indicate they disagree that the district is moving in a positive direction; more than two thirds (69%) *strongly* disagree with this statement. Disillusionment was nearly as widespread in the most recent survey conducted in 2012 (86% disagreed), though not nearly as intense (50% strongly disagreed).



Similarly telling, 96% of respondents disagree (73% strongly) that the climate and culture in the district make for a positive work environment. **The total number that disagrees has risen from 81% to near-unanimity over the course of just three years.**

These perceptions align with the overwhelming sense that district administration does not meaningfully support teachers and staff at their work sites, that employees by and large are *not* valued by the district, that communication from district administration does not lend itself to student learning and, most importantly, that DCSD does not provide an atmosphere that is conducive to student learning. **The number of *strong* responses, exceeding 50% and reaching as high as three quarters of all teachers and staff surveyed, ranks as one of the more profound findings in this study.**



### WORKING CONDITIONS AND SUPPORT

Another primary goal in this study was to evaluate the extent to which teachers and staff have the tools they need to properly educate students. In that respect, DCSD comes up adequate on some measures, and decidedly short on others.

Roughly six in ten teachers and other certified staff agree that they have access to the technology they need and that it functions properly, though a rather sizeable portion of teachers (38%) do not agree that they have what they need. **Worse, only about half agree that they have the materials and equipment they need.**

Teacher Resource Statements*		
Statements	Total Agree	Total Disagree
I have access to the functioning technology that I need to do my job.	62%	38%
I have the materials and equipment I need to do my job.	54%	46%
I have access to meaningful and useful professional development through the school district.	38%	62%
With few exceptions, I am able to complete my work within normal work hours.	8%	92%

*\*These questions were asked only of teachers.*

Teachers are decidedly less optimistic when it comes to their opportunities for professional development. Sixty-two percent of respondents disagree that they have meaningful opportunities for development, including 28% who feel that way strongly. **Not only do teachers feel underprepared in terms of training and development, they feel overburdened by the demands of the classroom.** A meager 8% reports being able to generally complete their work within normal hours.

These factors, combined with a fairly comprehensive sense that school working conditions are unsatisfactory (only 23% of teachers and staff rate working conditions as satisfactory), likely contributes significantly to the overall notion that teachers are not adequately valued or supported by the school district.



#### COLLABORATION AND EVALUATION

Teachers consistently cite a lack of opportunities to collaborate with each other, and point even more strongly to the fact that district policies do not promote such collaboration in the first place. Just one quarter of respondents agree that they are being encouraged to collaborate in the status quo.

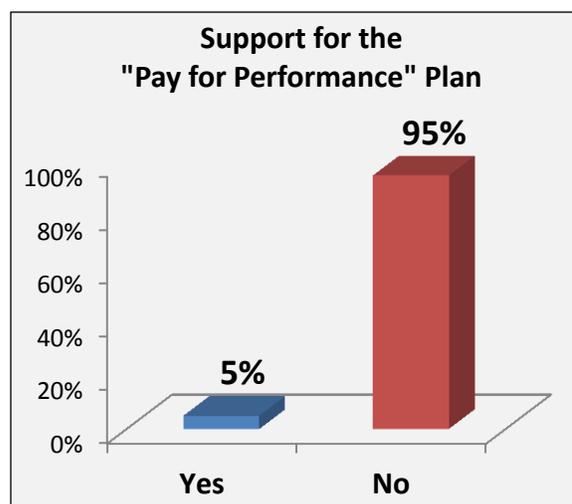
**This study also reveals a clear disconnect between teachers and the administration when it comes to decisions that affect their jobs or career paths.**

More than eight in ten teachers disagree that they have input on important decisions like these.

However, their frustration goes beyond transparency and the desire for greater input. **One of the most salient findings in this data is the extent to which teachers loathe their own evaluation system, Continuous Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness (more commonly known simply as CITE).** Just three out of every hundred teachers in DCSD agrees that CITE serves its purpose in reliably rating their performance. Not surprisingly, this dismay is equally evident when it comes to the district’s “Pay for Performance” plan. Fully 19 in 20 teachers do not support this approach, also known as “World Class Targets.” The current dynamics of support (5% yes, 95% no) represent a substantial shift from 2012, when 23% supported the system.

District Climate Statements*			
Statements	Total Agree	Total Disagree	Strong Disagree
I have adequate opportunity to collaborate with others who impact my work.	27%	73%	27%
Current DCSD policies encourage staff collaboration.	25%	75%	36%
I have input on decisions that affect my job.	18%	82%	41%
DCSD’s teacher evaluation system, CITE, is a valid and reliable tool for evaluating my performance as a teacher.	3%	96%	82%

\*These questions were asked only of teachers.



To be clear, this near-unanimous opposition extends beyond the specifics of the CITE approach to encompass any plan that ties evaluations to test scores. When asked to assess whether “teacher

evaluations should be tied to student achievement as measured by standardized test scores,” 90% disagreed. A staggering 73% *strongly disagreed* with such a strategy.

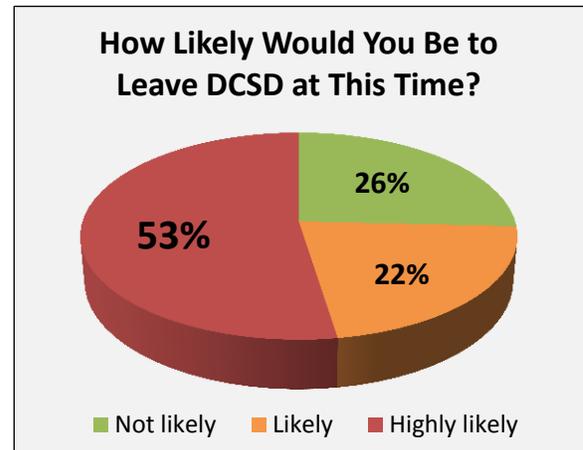
Furthermore, 95% oppose the district’s use of a “market pay” system, in which teacher salaries depend on the supply and demand for each type of teacher. Much like the shift in attitudes against CITE, teachers and certified staff have fully unified against a market pay system in recent years (since 2012, opposition rose 18 points—up from 77%).

### THE PRACTICAL IMPACT

The aforementioned aspects of the teacher/district relationship—including record frustration with the district’s image and atmosphere, its perceived inability to cultivate a positive learning environment for students, and the overarching feeling of mistrust when it comes to the fundamentals of the employer/employee relationship—culminate in a startlingly high desire to leave the district. **A majority (53%) of DCSD teachers indicate they are highly likely to gain employment in a different district if given the opportunity.** Another 22% rate themselves as likely to leave. By contrast, a scant 26% say they are not likely to leave the district.

**Satisfaction in general has been—and continues to—trend in the wrong direction, nearly across the board.** Indeed, the number saying they are highly likely to leave the district, if given the opportunity, has risen 13 points in just three years (from 40% in 2012).

When asked to explain their reasons for seeking to leave the district, teachers cite a variety of factors, often specific to their tenure (or lack thereof) in the district, as well as their own unique interactions with district administration and their experiences in the classroom.



Some respondents say they are actively looking for other employment or that they already have one foot out the door.

*“I would be very sad to leave Douglas County but **I would never regret leaving** under the current school board.”*

*“**Interviewing in other districts now.**”*

Even those who plan to stay predominantly acknowledge feeling trapped in a bad situation, but cite a high likelihood that they would suffer wage loss due to their seniority if they decided to leave.

*“I stay because if I were to leave it is highly unlikely that another district would match my current salary. I am very stressed out by my job. **I often have trouble sleeping** because I cannot stop worrying about work.”*

*“I would leave, **without a doubt**, if another district would give me all my years or pay me what I make now.”*

On the other hand, some older teachers are resigned to retiring early, even at the risk of financial hardship, to avoid further stress and conflict.

*“I am not leaving for another district, I am retiring. **This is 4 years earlier than I had planned.** This will be a hardship for my family. I love my students but I am done with the district initiatives that do not support my teaching and, ultimately, the children and their learning.”*

Still others are reluctantly staying due to loyalty to their students, community, and in many cases, their principals.

*“...I feel I need to leave and find a district where the focus is on quality teaching and outcomes, not on superfluous documentation and **deceptive use of feedback that undermines teacher morale.** Yet I stay because I love my school in spite of the district and I have learned to do the minimum required to meet district requirements, so that I can return to focusing on meeting the actual needs of my students, which is what I truly love to do.”*

It is especially hard to ignore the number of teachers—particularly those who are newer to the profession—who say they are interviewing elsewhere, have already quit DCSD effective this year, or are considering leaving teaching altogether.

*“I’m more likely to **leave education** and go into another line of work.”*

*“**Planning on leaving even if I don’t gain employment outside DCSD.**”*

*“**I have resigned effective 5/28/15.**”*