

The University of Chicago

# Back to (In-Person) School: Examining Chicago Public Schools Teachers' Perceptions on Workload

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## **Abstract**

Scholars have extensively studied teachers' workloads and the connection between teacher workload and burnout. The changes in workload during virtual learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been documented, but changes upon the return to in-person schooling have yet to be explored. In this paper, I examine Chicago Public Schools teachers' perceptions of their workload and how they are reacting to this. Using nine qualitative interviews, I found strong evidence of a rise in workload caused by the decline of students' emotional and academic skills. As teachers take on multiple roles in the classroom, they have been left to support students on all fronts. In response to this workload, most teachers have reported taking a step-back from all these responsibilities and only doing the minimum requirements of their job. The exceptions in this trend may point to inequities in the resources available to each school and teacher. These findings further current research on teacher workload, burnout, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three policy recommendations to Chicago Public Schools are offered to aid with teachers' workload based on the findings of this study. The findings presented here may help guide future studies on how teachers at different types of schools adapted to in-person learning after the pandemic.

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## Introduction

Questions regarding teacher workload and burnout have long been central to research on teacher retention rates. Teachers' perceptions of their workload have been the center of many pieces of literature (Manuel 2018, Bayes et al. 2019, Zydziunaite et al. 2020). In recent years, scholars have extended their attention to these questions in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, teachers have been burdened with the task of making up for any gaps created during the pandemic. This includes addressing issues like the significant decline of students' mental health and behavior in the classroom and signs of 'unfinished learning' (Dorn et al., 2021). This new responsibility forces teachers, who are already overworked, to adjust their teaching and responsibilities to the new needs of students.

Unsurprisingly, research has shown that teachers' mental health has also declined (Kim et al., 2022) and that stress was the biggest cause of teachers quitting during the pandemic (Diliberti et al., 2021). While prior studies have expanded on the feelings of teachers during virtual learning during the pandemic (Kim et al. 2022, Diliberti et al. 2021), teachers' perceptions of their workload change have been largely unexplored. It is essential to understand the perceptions of teachers in order to comprehend how schooling has changed since returning to in-person schooling. To better explore this, I offer an analysis of 9 qualitative interviews to better answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive their workload after the return to in-person schooling, as compared to before the pandemic?
- 2) What factors influence their perception of workload?
- 3) How do they respond to any changes in workload?

In this paper, I will draw upon 9 interviews with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers to demonstrate how they perceive their workload to have changed since the return to in-person schooling. My findings detail the difference between perceptions of workload before the pandemic and after the return to in-person schooling. I explore what exactly made the workload higher and how it affects their attitudes towards their jobs. These findings could help account for low teacher retention rates after in-person schooling began again.

Findings reveal three factors that contribute to an enhanced emotional workload. Students' academic and social skills have declined, leaving teachers to help students grow multiple grade levels. Multiple teachers noted that students need extra support in synthesizing classroom concepts. Additionally, their social skills have left them unable to process and handle personal issues and conflicts. Teachers take responsibility for their students, acting as role models and taking extra time for social-emotional lessons inside their classrooms.

With this, teachers must wear multiple hats throughout the school day. Not only are they responsible for teaching daily lessons, on top of the paperwork and administrative aspects of teaching, they must also work with students emotionally. Since they are usually thought of as trusted adults by students, teachers support students with social problems happening at home and in school. This means that with the decline of social and academic skills, teachers have more on their plates.

After returning from digital learning, many teachers reported taking a step back from the time commitment. This could be in the form of setting a limit on how long they stay at the school or stepping back from supervising student extracurriculars. Whether this is an early attempt to preserve their passion for teaching or being close to giving up on their career, we can recognize that this step back highlights a reaction to an intensified workload.

## **Previous Research**

### *Teacher Workload and Burnout*

A considerable number of studies have explored the influencing factors of teachers' workload. Looking at a poll among members of a teachers' association, Bayles and Knowles (2019) find that grading, needing different instruction methods for diverse learners, and finding classroom resources were the factors that led to a greater workload. As teachers are solely responsible for managing their classrooms, they must balance these demands during their off-hours when they are not instructing students, which can lead to substantial amounts of unpaid work. Furthermore, external factors such as standardized test preparation and heightened expectations from parents, administration, and the community (Manuel, 2018) contribute to the already heavy workload of teachers. These outside factors may even be competing, with different opinions and beliefs about the teacher's role with students. Additionally, they may have their own ambitions and goals inside the classroom that they may have to put aside. These external factors may also vary depending on the school type, student demographics, and resource availability.

The impact of these factors extends beyond the classroom, affecting teachers' time outside of instruction. This, in turn, can result in high levels of stress among teachers, as evidenced by a strong correlation between workload and stress (Zydzianaite et al., 2020). Neglecting to address the workload issue may have detrimental effects on both teacher and student success. This underscores the limited flexibility that teachers have with respect to their workload. Irrespective of the personal impact, teachers are obliged to confront their workload to guarantee success for both them and their students. The negative impact of stress on teachers can also be observed by students, as they are sensitive to the emotional state of their teachers. Oberle, Gist, Cooray, and Pinto (2020) found that stress among teachers, often caused by burnout, is noticeable to students.

This may manifest in multiple ways, from a negative classroom environment to disruptions to the learning atmosphere. Student-teacher relationships are often essential in classrooms, especially when students do not have other resources such as counselors or school psychologists. Noticing the stress may cause students to be hesitant of these relationships in order to relieve stress of teachers. Hogan and White (2021) suggest that teachers' disconnection from the school and community is a more significant factor leading to teacher burnout. This highlights the importance of teachers building these connections with their students and other teachers, which may not be entirely possible with an enhanced workload.

The connections built with coworkers, particularly other teachers and members of administration, can heavily impact the job satisfaction and retention of teachers. Looking at a survey of eighth-grade teachers, Toropova, Myrberg, and Johansson (2021) found a strong association between working conditions and teacher satisfaction. They further this by pointing out the strong correlation between teacher collaboration and satisfaction. Teacher collaboration could lead to increased engagement in the workplace, leading to improved outcomes for students and perhaps a shared workload. Allensworth et al. (2009) discovered that teacher and principal collaboration contributed to a high retention rate. They also found that teachers tend to remain where they have input in decision-making processes. This finding highlights the importance of communication and collaboration in the work environment by giving teachers the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. By working with the administration, teachers may have a sense of shared responsibility and ownership of the school community, which can ultimately lead to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. To this end, there have been considerations for potential policy implementations to increase workplace collaboration. In a recent study, Hurley (2021) explored the crucial need for professional development opportunities in order to build



relationships among staff. By promoting a more collaborative environment, the school administration could create optimal working conditions that lower teacher workload and stress.

### *Schools and the Pandemic*

Several studies have already attempted to unpack the changing state of the labor market both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has shown that the pandemic has not significantly impacted the labor market for teachers. They argue that it has always been in a dire state, thus more systemic changes than increasing recruitment are needed (Audrain et al., 2022). While there may be more retirements and resignations upon returning to in-person schooling due to teacher burnout (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021), teacher burnout is not new. This signals a need to reform the conditions of the career as a whole, rather than look for short-term solutions. While examining what is deterring people from the teaching profession, Carver-Thomas et al. (2021) found that teacher testing policies and lack of financial aid for preparation programs have negatively affected the teacher labor market. Along with that, concerns about workload caused potential teachers to not want to pursue the profession. These can be alleviated by policies in order to increase the teacher workforce. Again, while the pandemic may have heightened these factors, it is essential to note that they have always existed within the teaching profession.

Additionally, teachers were faced with the challenge of addressing virtual learning's effect on students once they reentered the classroom. Research by Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, and Viruleg (2022) found that the pandemic has resulted in a significant amount of 'unfinished learning' for students. This means that students were more behind in learning than they would have been if they were inside the classroom. They discovered that students were five months behind in math and four months behind in reading, indicating that they are about half a school year behind in schooling (Dorn et al, 2). It was also found that a third of parents who were surveyed

expressed they were worried for their child's mental health (Dorn et al., 7). While isolated from their peers, students were unable to socialize, which can be detrimental to traits such as communication, leadership, and conflict resolution. As students get older, they tend to deal with more complex issues within their relationships. Without their social learning, they may experience more difficulty in solving these problems.

Teachers are looked at to help alleviate this problem by parents, administration, and students themselves. Additionally, they would have to deal with any classroom disruptions arising from these behaviors. One study found that classroom disruptions were up 56% after returning to in-person classrooms, as compared to before COVID (NCES, 2022). To address these learning and social losses, Deli et al. (2022) conducted a study allowing teachers to provide input on potential solutions. Sixteen teachers generally concluded that make-up classes would allow students to readjust to in-person classes. While this may initially require more work for both students and teachers, both groups would ultimately benefit. This emphasizes the fact that teachers would put their workload onto themselves for the sake of their students. They feel that they are responsible for helping their students overcome the learning gap caused by the pandemic.

Not only did studies explore students' wellness during and after the pandemic, but they also explored teachers' well-being. By interviewing 24 teachers at three-time points throughout the pandemic, Kim et al. (2022) found that teachers' mental health and well-being declined during the pandemic. Several factors contributed to this, such as the workload, health struggles, and holding multiple roles in schools. This was furthered by another study that pointed out that stress was why most teachers quit after the pandemic began (Diliberti et al., 2021). According to the study, the demands of being a teacher were already highly stressful and the pandemic only amplified this. While teachers' mental health declined, they were the street-level bureaucrats

working directly with students and parents. It is clear that there is an essential need to lighten teachers' workload to both improve retention and increase their well-being.

## **Background**

### *Chicago Public Schools*

Chicago Public Schools houses a plethora of school types, each with different admissions and instruction requirements. Since we are looking at Chicago Public Schools as a whole, we cannot ignore the distinct differences in the types of schools present in the district. For this study, the 9 teachers interviewed currently work at different types of schools. The three types included in this study include selective enrollment, charter, and neighborhood. Because teacher workloads may vary based on school requirements, it is essential to understand what makes each type of school unique. While they are all part of Chicago Public Schools, the funding and resource availability may vary based on school type, which directly affects teacher workload.

Students must take the Selective Enrollment High School exam while in middle school in order to try to get into the more selective schools. Students can apply to as many schools as they want. If they do not get admitted, they attend their neighborhood school, which is determined by attendance boundaries. Students use the GoCPS website to apply to and rank their preferences for schools. In 2021, about 89% of students who submitted applications were accepted to one of their top three choice options, not including selective enrollment schools (CPS, 2021). CPS has accounted for families without WiFi or computer access and allows them to call the CPS Office of Access and Enrollment to apply. Still, this may present difficulty for families who work during normal business hours.

The most selective and prestigious schools in CPS are the selective-enrollment high schools. These schools are harder to get into and even have their own selection process. Cut scores

to be considered for admittance are determined on a year-by-year basis. These schools tended to have smaller proportions of low-income students than other district schools (Barrow, 2022). In order to combat this, Pedro Martinez, the CPS CEO, voiced the need to get rid of the mandate that allocated 30% of slots at selective enrollment schools to students with the highest 7th-grade test scores and grades. Within these 30% slots, the cuff-off score for six out of eleven selective enrollment schools was above 850 out of 900 points (CPS, 2022). The students that meet this cutoff come from White and Asian higher-income families, while the rest of the 70% of slots are more socioeconomically diverse (Karp, 2022). The selective enrollment schools have taken steps to increase inclusion efforts for diverse learners. The number of diverse learners enrolled in selective enrollment schools increased from 262 in 2020 to 489 in 2021 (CPS, 2021). While selective enrollment schools do have an exclusionary history, there have been recent steps to increase the accessibility to attend these schools. The number of higher income families in the school could point to additional funding from parents through donations and fundraisers. Additionally, the increase of diverse learners means the schools also receive additional funding to hire support staff for inside the classroom. These two additional funding opportunities can ease teachers' workloads, as additional student support and resources to aid with teachers' tasks.

Charter schools are contracted with Chicago Public Schools but are not officially part of it. They still must file and publish data with CPS. They carry out their own application process, independent of CPS. There are some within-school differences that affect both students and teachers. Some charter schools may adopt zero-tolerance policies with emphasis on discipline for misbehaviors. In 2019, 130 students per 1000 enrolled were suspended in Chicago charter schools, versus 27 students per 1000 in non-charter schools (Kates, 2022). These inside-school differences

may affect teachers workload, specifically how they must handle student misbehaviors. Because they make up an integral part of Chicago's school system, they will be included in this study.

The final type of school is the neighborhood school. These schools are the most common throughout the United States. Students attend this school if they live inside the attendance boundary. These schools may contain International Baccalaureate or Career and Technical Education programs. Students must apply to these separately. Some schools feature selection criteria and scores based on academic performance, while others have a lottery for these programs. Some schools may also offer dual-enrollment programs, which allows students to get college credit. These schools generally see less funding and resources than the other schools described. These schools generally have less support staff within the school to aid teachers, thus increasing teachers' workload. Because of this, it is essential to take the type of school a teacher works at into consideration when comparing across all of Chicago Public Schools.

### **Data and Methods**

This study focuses on teacher perception of their workload after their return to in-person teaching in Chicago Public Schools [CPS]. To obtain this data, 9 semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gain insight on three main aspects: what their workload looks like now, how it compares to before the COVID-19 pandemic, and what factors contribute to this. This study is approved by the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board.

All interviewees must currently teach at a CPS high school, which includes grades 9-12. Some schools may include lower grades as well, but only teachers who taught at the high school level were contacted. Only math, science, English, or social studies teachers were chosen because they work with the general population of schools, unlike arts or physical education teachers. This is because students may self-select into an art class or a certain sport, altering the behaviors that

these teachers may have to deal with. Certain specialty schools, such as fine art schools or military academies, were excluded due to the potential workplace differences due to the very self-selective environment. My research does include charter schools, selective enrollment, and general education high schools. In order to think about Chicago Public Schools as a whole, I wanted to include these types of schools. They may also illuminate any differences in how the types of schools may affect workload after coming back in-person.

To recruit the current teachers, I visited each school website individually. Outreach was conducted through electronic messaging. Emails were available on the schools' websites. About five teachers were emailed per school, depending on email accessibility, in order to avoid having multiple interviewees from the same school. Some schools did not list email addresses and, instead, had forms to fill out that would send an email. In order to protect the teachers' anonymity, these schools were then eliminated from the study. No follow-up emails were sent due to the high number of potential participants emailed. Within the emails, teachers were told the overall concept of the study: to learn more about teachers' workloads upon the return to in-person classes. They were also told they could reply through any email address if they were hesitant about responding through their school email. One teacher in the study did take advantage of this. There is some selection bias in the sample, however. Teachers interested in the study and who wanted to voice their opinions would want to participate the most, possibly causing the data received to be slightly skewed. One interviewee was found through a personal connection. I then emailed them the same interview brief as other teachers. Teachers were asked to respond with available times for the interview if they wanted to participate. Some of the interviews took place during the school day. Interestingly, four out of the nine interviews took place as the interviewee was driving home, which may shine light on the amount of free time they have.

Interviews were conducted through Zoom, each averaging from 30-45 minutes. Participants were reminded that their answers would not be shared with their administration and pseudonyms would be used several times throughout the interview, especially as we approached questions they may be hesitant to answer. These questions included “Have you ever wanted to quit your position?” and “Do you feel supported by your administration?”. Participants were also asked to share policy recommendations, either at the district or school level. This was done due to my belief that the primary stakeholders, teachers, should have a say in policy. This will later influence my policy recommendations.

The interviews were recorded, with the interviewees’ consent. The audio was then uploaded onto Otter.ai. This is a software that automatically transcribes interviews and recognizes different voices. The audio was then listened to in order to correct any mistakes in the transcription. Pseudonyms were added in place of names, while high school names were excluded altogether. There are no connections between the pseudonym and the real name. The transcript was then coded using MAXQDA, a coding software. With this, I manually marked key themes and keywords. These themes were topics that emerged in multiple interviews, such as ‘role of teacher’ or ‘student academics’. The themes decided were subjective but based on the goals for the interviews. Additionally, I may have had bias when selecting what I deem important to this research.

Only one teacher did not allow for the recording of the interview. In this case, handwritten notes were taken during the interview. The notes were not a verbatim transcript but did contain some direct quotes. These were not typed digitally, but instead manually highlighted to mark for themes later. This does present some limitations for later coding, as I was unable to write attitudes and tones to later be reflected on.

The teachers interviewed have a broad range of school backgrounds. As discussed earlier, the type of school may have influence on the experiences of teachers. As such, we will summarize the school profiles of the interviewees below:

Table 1: Interviewed Teachers and their School Demographics

Teacher Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Number of Students	Low-Income Percentage	High School Specialty
Elena	11	700	90%	GE with 2 CTE <sup>1</sup>
Teresa	3 <sup>2</sup>	1500	50%	GE with IB
Oliver	20	1000	85%	GE with 4 CTE
William	18	1500	90%	GE with 5 CTE and IB
Sienna	13	600	80%	Charter with CTE
Tara	7	2000	45%	GE with Fine Arts, IB, and Honors
Jack	26	2100	35%	Selective Enrollment
Cecilia	20 <sup>3</sup>	300	85%	Early College
Julia	16	1000	90%	GE with IB

Table 1 demonstrates the teachers with the demographics of the school. Teachers were asked how many years they taught during interviews. This is essential in order to understand how workload changes may affect teachers at all phases in their teaching careers. High school population was

<sup>1</sup> GE stands for General Education. CTE stands for Career and Technical Education program, which students must apply for initially. These can teach skills ranging from Culinary Arts to Information Technology. IB stands for International Baccalaureate, an advanced program. Early College notes that the school offers courses that gives college credit.

<sup>2</sup> Teresa began as a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. She had experience student teaching before the pandemic, which she used as a comparison.

<sup>3</sup> Cecilia taught for 20 years at many levels, including elementary school and college undergraduates. She has only taught high school for 2 years.



rounded to the hundreds in order to not reveal what school it is. Percentages of students enrolled in the school from low-income backgrounds were rounded in increments of five. Students were classified as low-income if they were eligible for free or reduced lunch. All school demographic information was found on the Chicago Public Schools website.

### *Findings and Analysis*

This study examined the workload of teachers after returning to in person schooling. To understand the full scope of the workload change, we must break down findings into three categories: student development, role of the teacher, and resulting attitudes. Student development after the pandemic significantly declined. This means that teachers had to put in extra work to make up for the loss in learning and behavioral skills. Teachers' perspectives on this decline gives us insight into how much their workload has increased exactly. The next section details the role of the teacher to students. Teachers explain how they do more than just teach students; instead, they provide emotional support and wear a variety of hats. Together, with the decline in social and academic skills, we can see how the workload of teachers has significantly increased upon returning to in-person learning. Finally, we will examine how teachers react to this change. Before the pandemic, many teachers took on exceedingly long hours of extra work. Teachers commented that this changed after the pandemic when they took a step back.

#### *Student Development*

We will examine student development in two sections: academic and social. This will allow us to understand the full scope of new challenges for teachers.

#### Academic

Interviewees were directly asked if they noticed any differences in students' academic performance upon returning to in-person learning. Eight of the nine teachers noted that students

fell academically behind. Some of this may stem from attitudes about academics. For instance, Celia noted that many students would respond with “I don’t know” when asked a question with no intention of working through a problem. After virtual learning, students may be feeling less engaged inside the classroom. Teachers must alter lesson plans to find new ways to engage students, thus increasing their workload.

A decreased attention span also affects students’ academic performance. With virtual learning allowing for students to turn off their cameras or have distractions off screen, students may not be able to hold their attention on the lesson now that they are back in person. Elena echoes this: “It’s like their complete lack of awareness in terms of like, they don’t even know when they’re on their phones.” Elena’s frustrations highlight the struggle of CPS teachers in trying to engage their students. This results in extra work on their plate, finding ways to keep students off their phones and put their focus into their classwork.

There are also problems with attendance seen in the classroom. With students becoming more relaxed with the school guidelines, there seemed to be less importance on getting to the school on time. Oliver gave an example of this: “My first period class, for example, usually, when the bell rings, there’s like three or four people there out of, like, say 26.” With that few students showing up on time, Oliver must push back his class schedules. Students fall behind when they miss learning opportunities. Because Oliver is still responsible and cares for the success of all students in his class, his workload constantly increases when students do not show up to class on time. Tara describes how the decline in academic skills and attitudes affects her work: “Kids were just so far behind and like, you know, helping and readjusting the curriculum, reworking our calendars, all of that took up extra bandwidth that normally, it wouldn’t have taken because we would just be doing what we always did.” This gives us a clear idea of how teachers adjust to the

needs of their students. If the pandemic had not happened, teachers would be able to use their same curriculum on a year-by-year basis, adjusting it slightly for the students' needs. With the larger decline, however, they have to make even bigger adjustments, thus increasing teachers' workloads.

These experiences with the decline in students' academics was not found in all schools. Jack, who teaches at a CPS selective enrollment school, did not notice such drastic changes in student academics. He offers his reasoning as to why: "...most of my kids are pretty much on the same level... I think a lot of that speaks to probably the support of their families and kind of where they were academically coming into a school like [this], a lot of lot of resources, a lot of abilities to get outside tutoring, and things of that nature." While we cannot definitively state that selective enrollment school teachers were exempt from this increase in workload, it is interesting how the outside resources play into this. Jack shines light on the tutoring and familial support could make a difference in the learning loss from COVID-19. This must be kept in mind when making policy recommendations, as the increase in workload did not affect all CPS teachers in the same ways.

### Social

Students' social skills also heavily declined during and after virtual learning. As students were on lockdown, they were unable to socialize with their peers on the same scale as they were before. Along with that, teachers were unable to correct and shape student behaviors during school hours. This means students missed out on over a year of social behavior learning. This had dramatic effects on students, as discussed by the interviewees. Elena describes one situation: "Our students are mentally stuck in like sixth grade, but they have 16-year-old problems and very adult problems. So the reason that the workload feels more intense is because they don't have those social emotional skills to manage their own emotion and behaviors in a way that they might have been able to in the past." Elena clearly paints the picture here: teachers must help support their

students with their adult problems, which increases the workload. These can include trauma and grief, both of which are issues that students may have had to deal with especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is clear that teachers act out of passion, not duty, when dealing with students' emotional problems. Seeing as all teachers interviewed answered that the students were their favorite part of their job, the social-emotional support that teachers give students will not end. For instance, William described his favorite part about being a teacher:

I would say that watching students grow and develop, not just academically, but also their social emotional development and growth. Working with teenagers, in particular, there's so much going on in their lives. Making decisions about who they're going to be as a person that are going to stay with them, potentially. And that just really need to be rounded and to have an opportunity to kind of talk to them, to be a kind of trusted adult that they can talk to you about, just about anything.

Teachers enjoy this part about being a teacher, but the trauma and emotions they deal with are more in line with the role of school counselors. While they are not expecting or wanting this trusting relationship to end, it is important to recognize that it has increased since the return to in person learning now that students are being reacquainted with role models.

Students' behaviors have also declined negatively in a way that affects the classroom environment. Just as Elena described the mental skills of the high schools as sixth graders, Sienna describes them in a similar way: "A lot of immature behavior... middle school kids are kind of notorious for like doing something right front of you while you are looking them in the eye. And then when you say like, 'why did you just throw that ball at me. I was looking at you' and they're like, 'I didn't throw it'. It's like that kind of thing. But from a 10th grader." The social decline of the students affects classroom behavior, which affects teachers' workload. They must aid students with gaining emotional and social skills just to mediate the classroom. The ball throwing also

demonstrates an effect that was created during the pandemic. Students may not have interacted with authority figures outside their parents for over a year. The return to an in-person classroom is a newer experience for them, so they must learn how to adjust back to the classroom.

Teresa described the high school students in a similar way, as seventh graders, with similar sentiments as Sienna. Teresa noted that she is certified to teach middle school, meaning she has been taught and has experience with middle school level behaviors. She mentioned that a lot of her colleagues do not, making it more difficult for them to understand the needs of the students. This emphasized the difficulty of the increased workloads for teachers. Not only are they now having to deal with increased disruptive behaviors and teach new social skills to students, they also may not have worked with students at this social level, making it a new experience for them. William had similar thoughts to Teresa. He explained how he thought all teachers had to restart and relearn how to work with students upon coming back to in-person schooling:

“It is a much more emotionally taxing job than it was before the pandemic... The president of the Chicago Teachers Union said, we're all first year teachers now. And that really is what it felt like. In a lot of... there is so much that's different, and so much that's new. That it's a lot of extra energy, to figure out how this is going to work. And a lot of emotional labor is going into taking care of students who are bringing a tremendous amount of trauma into the school with them.”

With these new challenges being faced by students, teachers must rethink how they interact with them on a day-to-day basis. Not only is there more trauma coming in with students, as William explained, it is different. The COVID virus affected the lives of students and teachers must be prepared to talk about that with their students. This increased teacher's workloads, as they now must navigate these unfamiliar topics with students.

Just as with the academic skills, Jack, who teaches at a selective-enrollment school, did not experience the same difficulties in students' social skills. He described a completely different type of behavior change:

I think everybody was kind of like, you know, sort of hands off and a little weirded out by being around people. I did find that some of my kids probably hadn't really left the house in a substantial way over that year. I think parents were scared that of the potential of COVID because they, you know, largely were not vaccinated... So it wasn't until the FDA started approve the vaccines that some of these kids got vaccinated that it resolved.

This initial concern over COVID-19 is expected when coming back to the classroom. Measures were still taken in order to protect students and staff from the virus. Seeing as this is the only social aspect Jack commented on, the difference between his experience and other teachers' is clear. His experience reflects those of every individual once returning to in-person activities, but there were no indicated disruptive behaviors. This sets Jack apart. We must consider that as he is the only one that had a different experience, it may be because of the school type that he works at.

### *Role of Teachers*

As touched on previously, teachers do more than teach lessons. They interact with students and provide guidance on personal lives and social problems. Seeing as teachers are some of the few adults a student may interact independently with, they are key role-models in a child's development. With this, however, teachers may be leaned on to provide guidance in situations that may seem more than what they are capable of handling, in a professional and personal sense. Elena describes her many roles with her students: "It's just like I'm a parent. I'm a psychologist. I'm a big sister. I'm, you know, I'm a warden, I'm a babysitter. And again, these things aren't necessarily super different than before. It's just so elevated, and it doesn't feel like there's any time to catch your breath. Yeah, there's no recovery time." Elena drives home the fact that she is more than just her students' teacher. A few of the roles she hits on are ones that could be lacking from a student's

life as well. Psychologists are not common inside schools. William described this need for counselors and trained professionals inside schools: “There are schools, elsewhere in my district, where there's 600 students for every counselor. And that's not enough to actually do anything attending to those students needs on a day-to-day basis. The counselors only are able to get involved when a crisis has occurred.” While it is not his school that has this specific need, he is able to speak on the behalf of his peers, especially since he is his school’s union delegate. This lack of counselors emphasizes the role that teachers play, as Elena describes. They must make up for this in their workload, dramatically increasing it.

While all teachers did emphasize that they have to deal with students’ social and emotional needs, Cecilia had very similar phrasing when describing her role with students: “Sometimes I’m mom, the protector, the counselor, and many more hats.” Cecilia’s mentioning of being a protector is particularly interesting, as she was also extremely critical of her school’s discipline policy. In this way, she is demonstrating how teachers must advocate on behalf of their students. While it may not happen a lot, this extra workload can take an entire day of planning or grading out for teachers. It is also emotionally draining for teachers to have to deal with on a regular basis. One teacher, Teresa, gave an example of the types of situations teachers must deal with inside schools:

We had a situation last year with one of our high-risk students. She was bullied and... she had an emotional support stuffed animal...that was like weighted and helped her with her anxiety. Individuals from another classroom that were targeting her took the teddy bear and ripped the head off. This individual was in foster care due to, you know, a variety of different situations so she doesn't get to replace that. We ended up sewing it back together, so I was one of the teachers that was there. I bought like extra weighted beads to make sure that the bear was weighted because they dumped out all the weighted beads and I sat there and I sewed it up.

Teresa’s story illuminates the broad extent that teachers go to support their students. This emotional labor, particularly when teachers must deal with traumatic situations, can be exhausting

for teachers. Not only do they have routine tasks such as grading and creating lesson plans, but they must also constantly act as a role model and counselor for students since they are a trusted adult. After coming back to in-person schooling, Teresa expressed that situations like this are more common. Thinking about the social behaviors declining, as previously discussed, it makes sense that teachers have to deal with more situations outside of their general job description of simply teaching their class.

### *Resulting Attitudes*

With the increase of the workloads regarding students' academic and social skills, many teachers noted that they are now reacting to this. Similar to many other professionals, the interviewees have reported attitudes similar to "quiet quitting". This happens when individuals stop going "above and beyond" for their jobs and doing the minimum requirements for the same pay (Rosalsky and Selyukh, 2022). Almost every teacher interviewed accounted for this, explaining how they now set time limits on how long they could stay at the school past the school day or how much work they did over the weekend. Teresa explained this decision by first relaying how it felt before the pandemic: "Just trying to keep up with everything and I was like this is too much. There were many days where I was like I don't know if I can keep doing this for the rest of my life." The workload was causing Teresa to rethink her career, something she felt passion for. Knowing that she loved the career too much to quit, she decided her best option was to take a step back:

I used to have access to my email 24/7 and I'd respond to students at any point in the day. That's one of the things I stopped and it's affected me positively... I'm not reading emails that are berating me by parents, you know, at nine pm before I go to bed and I'm crying my eyes out because this parents upset at me because X Y and Z. I try to limit the amount of work I do at home. So I try not to grade at all at home. If it doesn't get graded, it just doesn't get graded. Y'all just wait.



Her step back was echoed by many teachers. Finishing work at the end of the school day and having work-life balance is essential for teachers' mental health. With the increased emotional workload, teachers must find time to balance their other responsibilities. After returning to in-person schooling, they found that finishing work at home was also affecting their emotional workload. The 'quiet quitting' in this case was a reflection of the increased workload and its negative effects on teachers.

Another way that the change in attitude transpired was that teachers resigned from extra positions and duties that they were not getting paid for or not getting paid *enough* for. Sienna, for example, stepped back from the department chair position because she felt the workload did not equate to the extra pay she was receiving. She also explained how it was not worth it intrinsically either. The position is advertised as being a way to interact with administration to voice your thoughts, but that was not the case. Her dissatisfaction caused her to leave this position. Aiding with student extracurriculars was also one of the biggest time commitments outside of the normal school hours for teachers. Four teachers mentioned stepping back from these types of positions. Oliver, for instance, described his experience: "In the past, I've done Academic Decathlon and like the student council, and anime club. I just, I thought, maybe three or four years ago, I kind of quit all of those extracurricular type stuff." While the extracurriculars do line up with teachers' interests at times, the pay, or lack of it, was the driving factor in quitting. The extra time commitments only increased the workload of teachers, which is something they did not want to manage. Tara, one of the only interviewees who still aid with extracurriculars, explained why she does: "But I am getting paid for a lot of the extracurricular things I do. That wasn't always the case. But in the last couple of years, they have started funding, like teachers, you know, supervising

clubs and stuff a lot more.” Seeing how this was a recent change, it does add value to teachers’ time. This is essential since the overwhelming number of responsibilities of teachers can make it hard to balance extra involvements. It is important to note that teachers are not quitting on their students. The steps back predominantly pertain to the more strenuous and mundane tasks that do not directly relate to teaching or interacting with students, such as filling out school forms whenever they interact with a parent. They are simply setting boundaries on their time that is not directly spent on students.

### **Policy Recommendations**

There are several routes to decreasing teachers’ workloads, especially in the post-pandemic world. By understanding what has caused the workload increase, we can best make recommendations to aid teachers. Too many times are teachers left out of these conversations, then forced to uphold the latest policy that directly affects their job. Because of this, I specifically asked interviewees what they felt could be done to help alleviate their workloads. Below, in Table 2, are ideas that were given by the teachers:

Table 2: Teacher's Policy Recommendations on Workload

Teacher	Policy Recommendations
Elena	Better SEL <sup>4</sup> standards, more support staff, pay for more prep time
Teresa	Decreasing number of students in classroom, higher pay
Oliver	More support staff
William	More support staff
Sienna	Better teacher training and mentoring to prepare early career teachers
Tara	More teacher autonomy, limit tasks outside of the classroom <sup>5</sup>
Jack	Give assessments to students so teachers can understand student needs
Cecilia	Relook at inclusion efforts for students with IEPs with staff support <sup>6</sup>
Julia	Limit tasks outside of the classroom, teacher preparation

With that, I will expand on three of the most essential ones that correspond with the findings of the research. All three of these recommendations are policies that would be enacted at the district level but must be implemented at the school level with the districts' guidance. The implantation strategies were not provided by the teachers. They were only asked about the general ideas of what they think could be done to improve their workload.

*Recommendation 1: Increasing the amount of support staff inside schools*

More support staff, for both teachers and students, inside schools would aid with teacher workload. As described by the teachers interviewed, they hold many roles for students, including a trusted confidant for any social or emotional issues. Additionally, students' social skills have

<sup>4</sup> Social-Emotional Learning. In this context, Elena is referring to the SEL practices taught to teachers to aid students with social problems, rather than its more common reference of lessons directly taught to students.

<sup>5</sup> Examples given of tasks outside the classroom include field trip planning, mandatory parent outreach, frequent staff meetings deemed unnecessary by teachers.

<sup>6</sup> Cecilia is referring to the need to better help students within the Individual Education Program. She suggests having enough support staff to have an assistant work with these students one-on-one as needed.

declined, demonstrating a distinct need for more support for their mental health. This, however, should not fall upon teachers as an extra mandated responsibility. I recommend that Chicago Public Schools allocate funding to hiring additional support staff for schools. While many are focusing on the need to hire teachers and combatting the teacher shortage, hiring support staff would lower teacher turnover rates. With the implementation of additional counselors and school psychologists, students will have professionals to support them with trauma and other problems they may be facing. While this does not directly take off additional workloads, teachers would be able to refer students to these professionals, thus lessening their emotional labor. With that, having one counselor for hundreds of students would be ineffective, as they would be unable to accommodate regular visits from students. There should be 20-40 students to each counselor to allow students to visit multiple times per semester, as needed. Along with that, students would be able to build relationships with their counselor, allowing for more personalized support. While teachers would not lose their role as a trusted adult with students, they would not have to provide emotional counsel as often.

Additional support could also be of use inside the classroom. Teaching assistants could allow teachers to get in tasks such as grading during the school hours. This would directly help teachers lower the workload that must get finished outside of the classroom. They could also help alleviate the gap in learning that was created during virtual learning. Providing this extra hands-on support would get teachers' workloads to the conditions that are sustainable. This is essential for schools with larger class sizes where teachers are responsible for the academic and social skills for about 30 students per class. This higher workload would dramatically be alleviated with extra support inside the classroom and on tasks outside of the classroom.

*Recommendation 2: Social-Emotional Learning Lessons for Teachers and Students*

Teachers, as trusted role models for students, deal with many social and emotional issues for students. As discussed earlier, teachers must act as counselors for students. Most teachers explained that they love interacting with students, so they would continue to act as a trusted adult for students. Even with counselors available, teachers would still be a prominent role model in students' lives. While dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, both teachers and students may have faced trauma and social difficulties. These large problems are new to both groups, so it is important to acknowledge that teachers may not be currently equipped to handle these new issues.

I recommend that Chicago Public Schools implements Social Emotional Learning [SEL] training specifically addressing how to go about traumas and any lack of social skills caused by the pandemic. From the vast number of deaths in the United States caused by the pandemic and students remaining in isolation for about a year, students returned to the classroom with a need to regain their social skills. As we have learned throughout this paper, teachers are held responsible to make up for this loss. Because their trusted roles to students is not likely to change, Chicago Public Schools should create a curriculum that would train teachers in how to go about handling these issues, learning from school counselors, psychologists, and teachers themselves. The curriculum could be taught during school staff meetings that already take place on a weekly or biweekly basis, as reported by teachers. The curriculum should be very practical, giving scenarios to teachers in order to prepare them for real-life classroom situations. This should be a collaborative effort between administration and teachers to best address student needs. Having this resource would lower the emotional labor for teachers. They would not have to feel like the weight of their students' problems are on their shoulders alone, thus alleviating some of the stress caused by the workload.

*Recommendation 3: Create a council that aims to limit the workload outside of the classroom*

Chicago Public Schools create a policy that promotes teacher councils that work alongside school administration in order to reduce teachers' workloads. Aligning with previous research, teacher collaboration amongst themselves and with their principals is positively correlated with satisfaction within the workplace (Toropova et al., 2021; Allensworth et al., 2009). Like a union for each individual school, teachers would be able to voice their opinions on workload and possible changes that could be made within a school. Currently, teachers have several methods of letting their voice be heard: Local School Councils, a board made up by students, teachers, and parents that vote on budgets and school plans; Chicago Teachers Union, which is commonly known to fight for higher wages at the district level; and department chairs, who are responsible for speaking for the needs of entire departments. At the smaller level of expressing concerns about the outside of classroom tasks that takes up valuable time, the most valuable outlet would be the department chairs. However, four teachers interviewed have or have had this position. They expressed that it does not come with the benefit of expressing thoughts to the principal, but rather adds to their already full workloads.

Creating an avenue for teachers to express their opinions on school specific requirements would directly impact their workloads. As many teachers pointed out that there needs to be a limit to the outside of classroom requirements, teachers should be able to voice their concerns on this. For example, one school requires teachers to fill out a form before and after they interact with parents. While meeting with parents and having a record of it is important, there are ways to make the process more efficient. On a council, teachers would be able to voice these concerns with their administration to create effective and lasting change.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research investigated the change in CPS teachers' workload upon returning to in-

person learning. While much research has investigated the changes during the pandemic, specifically virtual learning, the changes upon returning to in-person have not been previously explored. To alleviate this gap, I interviewed nine teachers from Chicago Public Schools, the third largest school district in the country.

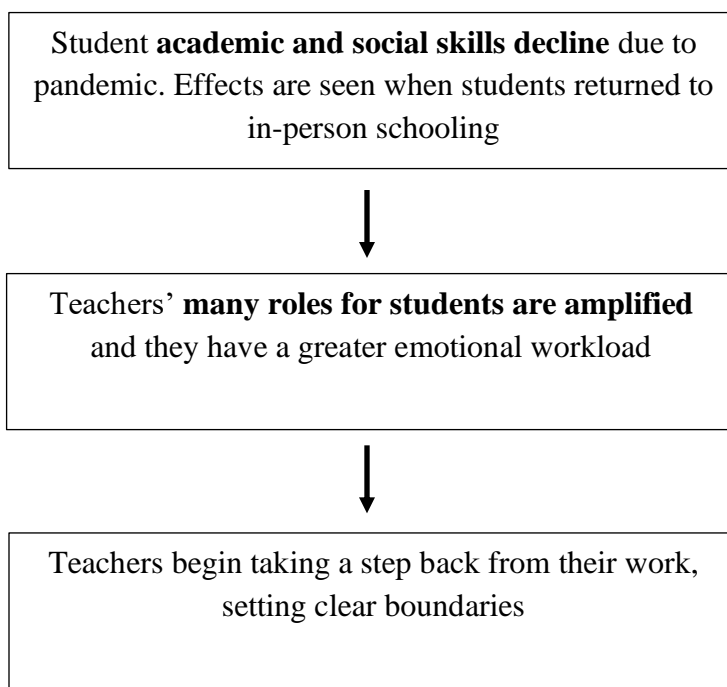
It is clear that student development has significantly declined since returning to in-person schooling. In terms of academics, students are struggling with class concepts and have acquired attitude changes towards school. This has caused teachers to need to add in additional curriculum and work assignments, thus increasing the workload. Additionally, students social and emotional skills have significantly lowered. Along with the grief and trauma many students faced during the pandemic, many students were not able to interact with peers to gain social skills. This caused more emotional labor for teachers, as they serve as role models for students as well. Both findings align with previous research that emphasized the unfinished learning and mental health decline that occurred during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2021). This research takes those findings a step further and explores its impact on teachers' workloads.

Teachers have always had multiple roles in their students' lives, even before the pandemic. They act as role models, mentors, counselors, and even parental figures on top of their duties as a teacher. Students work with these teachers every day and build trust with them. With the decline of social and academic skills, these different roles were amplified. Teachers had to sustain more emotional labor in the workplace, helping students deal with more intense issues.

Teachers then reported setting boundaries with their work. While they did not back away from emotionally supporting students, they did step down from additional responsibilities such as extracurriculars. This is essential when understanding how teachers are reacting to this increase. While setting boundaries is important and we should not shame teachers for this, it is important to

understand that the working conditions is what caused the step back. Drawing on previous research that examined the mental health decline in teachers after the pandemic (Kim et al., 2022), we must recognize the role of the heavy workload on teachers in this. This research examines what caused an increase in workload that then led to the mental health decline in teachers.

We can understand these three aspects of teacher workload as a chain of events. The figure below demonstrates this:



These events signify the need for change to be made. The COVID-19 pandemic only amplified the colossal teachers' workload, a problem which has always existed. With the pandemic bringing this to new light, change must be made now.

We must also acknowledge the difference in student development and workload change of the selective enrollment teacher, Jack. Previous research has found that the resource availability inside schools has a strong effect on teacher workload (Bayles and Knowles, 2019). Future studies should directly compare teacher workload and experiences between selective-enrollment and



general schools. This would give insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus the return of in-person schooling, affecting schools differently based on factors such as resources or students' family income. To attain a higher number of respondents, a future study could also add a survey component, where teachers can express their thoughts on their own time. Not only would this increase the number of respondents overall, but it would also allow for a wider variety of school types within CPS.

Future studies can also explore the path back to “normal” learning between schools. While this paper focused specifically on the comparison of before the pandemic to returning to in-person, another study can specifically look at how teachers and school administration are navigating their way back to where school was before the pandemic. This may also illuminate differences between selective-enrollment schools and other schools within CPS.

Teacher workload is an area of research that will always be studied. While we have noticed the changes in workload after returning to in-person schooling, we must note that teachers have always had a very high workload. With that, we must immediately focus on making systemic change in the profession.

## **Appendix**

### *Interview Guide*

#### Opening Questions

Tell me about your job.

- How many classes do you teach?
- How many students are in each class?
- Do you get breaks throughout your workday?
- Do you aid with any extracurriculars?
- How long is your school day?

How long have you been teaching?

- How long have you taught at X school?

What is your favorite part about teaching?

- How often do you get to experience this?

What is your least favorite part about teaching?

- How often do you experience this?

#### Workload

In this next section, I want to remind you that your responses will remain anonymous and I will not share your answers with administrators or anyone at your school. And as always, you don't have to answer if you don't want to.

Can you tell me about the last time you stayed past the hours you were getting paid for?

- What were you working on?
- Does this happen often?

Do you feel the work you do is more than what was included in the job description?

- What was included in the job description?
- How many more hours do you work after the school day?

Have you ever wanted to quit your position?

- What stopped you from doing so?
- How often did you feel this way?

Do you feel supported by your administration?

- How often did occasions like this happen?

#### Return to In-Person

How long have you been back in person?

- How long were you doing virtual learning?

Have you noticed differences in behavior from before COVID to being back in person?

- Can you give me an example?

Have you noticed differences in student achievement or success from before COVID to being back in person?

- Can you give me an example?

Do you feel that your workload has changed comparing before COVID to returning to in-person?

- Why?

Has your administration helped with adjustments needed after returning to in-person school, such as [examples discussed earlier]?

- In what ways?

Thinking generally about your experience as a teacher since the return to in-person schooling, how would you characterize the demands of your job?

If you could make any policy changes, whether at your school level or district level, what would you change? This could be related to our discussion today or anything you have on your mind!

Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today, is there anything we haven't covered yet about your workload or post-school closure experience that you think might be helpful for me to know?

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