



Addressing the Mental Health and Well-Being of Educators Through Self and Collective Care

Tips for School Leaders

Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

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Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations in the United States. An alarming 46% of educators teaching grades K-12 experience high levels of daily stress (or chronic stress) throughout the school year, which is comparable to levels reported by nurses (46%) and physicians (45%).¹ Chronic occupational stress, such as working long hours and having excessive workloads, negatively impacts educators' attitudes toward their work, as well as their health and well-being.² Educators who are under chronic stress are more likely to experience burnout, job dissatisfaction, and exhibit poor performance in their classroom instruction.² The effects of these challenges is indicated by rates of teacher turnover, which, in many cases, is directly tied to stress and job dissatisfaction.³ It is estimated that 10% of teachers leave the profession after one year and 17% leave within five years. Within urban districts, up to 70% of teachers leave within their first year of teaching.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges it has caused, such as disruptions to normal classroom routines, transitions to various models of distance or hybrid learning, increased isolation due to distancing, and concerns for the health and safety of students and themselves, have created new and unprecedented types of stress for many educators.⁵

As a result of these challenges that educators face, students' academic achievement and overall well-being are put at significant risk. For example, educators who experience high levels of stress and express signs of depression may create environments that are less conducive to learning, which leads to worsened academic outcomes among students.² Additionally, teacher burnout has been linked to decreases in academic achievement, as well as negative impacts on students' progress towards Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals.⁶

In order to help ensure that students receive high-quality instruction and support from their teachers, administrators, superintendents, and other school leaders will need to work collectively to address these types of challenges within schools. Specifically, there is a need to further develop plans and policies and implement practices that address the leading issues that educators face, namely burnout and chronic stress.

Teacher Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress

There are various factors that contribute to chronic stress among teachers, such as the stress and burnout related to excessive workloads—regular full-time teachers in public schools spend an average of 53 hours per week on school-related activities.⁷ An additional source of educator stress results from the challenges associated with students' behavioral and mental health needs.⁸

Working with students who have experienced episodes of trauma can create challenging learning environments due to educators limited capacity and training on how to best support student mental health.⁸ Research suggests that educators, especially those who serve in under-resourced communities, work with students who have had at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.⁸ An analysis of over 700,000 students in the United States suggests that the prevalence of trauma exposure among students in some districts is more likely the norm, rather than the exception.⁹ Prolonged exposure to students who have a trauma history may lead to an increased risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (STS), sometimes known as compassion fatigue, which is emotional duress that results from “helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person.”^{8,9} Research on the effects of STS has led to even greater concern about the impact that teaching may have on educators’ mental health and their capacity to effectively teach and support students.⁸

Educator and Staff Wellness

The availability of resources and supports for sustaining the mental health needs of educators is critical for their well-being, teaching efficacy, and career longevity. Research on workplace wellness supports the idea that programs and policies that support teacher wellness can promote improved physical, social, and emotional well-being while also having a positive impact on student outcomes.¹⁰ In order to support the well-being of teaching staff while minimizing burnout and chronic stress, school leaders must be attentive and willing to coordinate the implementation of supports and the delivery of services that will serve their needs.

The following list offers some suggestions and examples of actions and resources that may help school and district leaders to better support the mental health needs of educators, especially through the assessment of teacher needs and the promotion of collective and self-care practices.

What can school leaders do?

How to Get Started

- Assess school climate through surveillance and data collection tools, such as the [Georgia Department of Education’s School Climate Star Rating](#) tool, in order to create informed school-level policies that promote a positive and safe school culture
- Conduct an employee mental health needs assessment and assess interest in different kinds of self-care opportunities and wellness events
- Measure the organizational health of the school or district through the use of assessment tools such as the [Professional Quality of Life Scale \(ProQOL\)](#), developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- Create a district-wide action plan that includes opportunities to incorporate mental and emotional health programs within comprehensive school wellness plans or other existing frameworks and efforts within the school

Implementing Your Plan

- Create a multi-tiered system of supports for educators, such as the [Vida Clinic Three-Tiered Approach for Educators](#), which includes:
 - School-wide talks on issues such as trauma exposure and brain development
 - Small groups that bring educators together to focus on areas such as mindfulness, stress management, and regulation skills
 - One-on-one consultation sessions for educators
- [Partner with community-based organizations and mental health specialists](#) who can provide consultation to classrooms and to individual students

- Develop and/or disseminate [academic and non-academic strategies](#) for working with traumatized students
- Provide professional development and/or workshop opportunities on trauma, secondary traumatic stress, addressing student behavior challenges, stress management or other staff-requested topics
- Promote mental health and wellness by modeling healthy ways of dealing with stress and taking care of yourself
- Create a buddy system for each adult in the school to support each other
- Dedicate time at each staff meeting for an “emotional check-in” or to encourage expressions of gratitude within small groups
- Establish teacher support groups, such as those led by [Happy Teacher Revolution](#), that encourage educators to come together and share experiences and strategies that work for them
- Partner with local yoga studios, fitness centers, and spas to provide discounts for self-care services
- Facilitate [group mindfulness](#) sessions during lunch breaks
- Refresh the staff break room to create a more aesthetically-pleasing and relaxing space, for example, by painting, updating furniture, adding inspiring photos or posters, playing soft music, etc.

Endnotes

¹ Gallup. (2014). *State of America’s Schools: The path to winning again in education*. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/education/269648/state-america-schools-report.aspx>

² Greenberg, M. T., Brown, J. L., & Abenavoli, R. M. (2016). *Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

³ Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it*. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacherturnover-report>

⁴ Gray L, & Taie S (2015). *Public School Teacher Attrition and Mobility in the First Five Years: Results from the First through Fifth Waves of the 2007-08 Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study* (NCES 2015-337). U.S. Department of Education; Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

⁵ Bintliff, A. V. (2020). How COVID-19 Has Influenced Teachers’ Well-Being. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/multidimensional-aspects-adolescent-well-being/202009/how-covid-19-has-influenced-teachers-well>

⁶ Reynolds, L. W., Bruno, A. J., Ross, K. M., Hall, J. M., & Reynolds, J. (2020). Bolstering Staff Wellbeing in Schools. *Journal of School Health*, 90(5), 425-428. doi:10.1111/josh.12888

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. (2017, August). *Characteristics of public elementary and secondary school teachers in the United States*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017072.pdf>

⁸ Hydon, S., Wong, M., Langley, A. K., Stein, B. D., & Kataoka, S. H. (2015). Preventing secondary traumatic stress in educators. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, 24(2), 319-333.

⁹ Hobbs, C., Paulsen, D., Thomas, J. (2019). *Trauma-Informed Practice for Pre-service Teachers*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education.

¹⁰ Lever, N., Mathis, E., & Mayworm, A. (2017). School Mental Health Is Not Just for Students: Why Teacher and School Staff Wellness Matters. *Report on emotional & behavioral disorders in youth*, 17(1), 6-12.

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