TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Safeguarding the Well-Being of Teachers

Introduction

The past year has not been easy for teachers—but even in the pre-pandemic era, teaching was one of the most high-stress professions, yet one with the least amount of professional support. There are several reasons that teachers are exposed to heightened levels of stress in the workplace. For instance, teachers are often taught that their own health and happiness is, at best, second on their list of priorities, with anything related to student success taking the number one slot. In addition, teachers often have to deal with the issues that their students are facing, which include a world of varied stressors—from trauma and poverty to learning difficulties, bullying, and other troubling situations. On top of all of that, teachers need to manage the logistics of teaching every day, which has changed drastically over the past decade—not to mention, in the last year.

The emotional needs and stress levels of teachers are being overlooked, and it's leading to extremely poor teacher retention rates, bad experiences for students, and an overall lack of respect for teacher health and happiness. Schools, administrators, and teachers alike need to realize that teacher wellbeing must be a priority.

Case Studies: The Presence of Stress in Teachers' Lives—and the Relative Simplicity of Proactive Stress-Reducing Solutions

In one school, the administrators decided that giving a stressed-out teaching staff a peaceful and comfortable teaching room or lounge would be worth the up-front investment. Teachers described the current room as one that was outdated; in particular, they noted that the room tended to be a place furnished mainly by items that people no longer wanted in their own homes. This contributed to a dingy, faded look in the teaching lounge that did not help with daily rejuvenation or relaxation. The school decided to renovate the room, purchasing modern, beautiful furniture, painting the walls bright colors, and setting aside a small monthly budget to replenish the snack cupboard and to invest in good coffee. The result? Teachers flocked to the teaching lounge, spent more time collaborating together, and felt that they had a place of respite in their own school (Graham, 2021).

One study, designed to assess the ways that teachers in rural Alabama experience and cope with stress, used open-ended interviews to learn more about the factors that affected Alabaman teachers on a day-to-day basis. This study occurred well before the pandemic and therefore did not include the numerous issues associated with distance learning. In particular, the researchers were looking for stressors that they knew were likely red flags for leaving the teaching field. After the initiation of the study, the

researchers decided to incorporate self-evaluations, as well. At the end of the study, after analysis of the data, the researchers concluded that the teachers' stress stemmed mainly from the ways in which they were expected to get work done juxtaposed with the lack of resources and support they received from their school (Tolliver, 2019).

Section 1: The Importance of Healthy, Happy Teachers

Mental health is important; yet, for many populations, it's severely underemphasized. One such population includes grade school teachers, who work tirelessly for the mental health and growth of their students but may not have the time or resources to take care of themselves. While teachers and school districts alike tend to focus more on the health and happiness of their student populations, research and anecdotal evidence are showing us that unhappy, unhealthy teachers are detrimental to student success (and, clearly, not good for the teachers themselves and the overall school environment as well).

While some may realize the clear repercussions of failing to support teachers and their wellbeing, the downsides may not be clear to all. Fortunately, there are clear benefits that will follow from marked investment in teacher health, and these factors demonstrate just how important taking care of teachers really is.

Teacher Wellbeing

There are many potential definitions of teacher wellbeing, but perhaps a good working one is as follows:

Teacher wellbeing is the way that teachers react to both collective and individual events (social, environmental, and physical) that affect them, their colleagues, and their students. While teacher and student wellbeing are often linked, it's important to distinguish them. For example, while it's been demonstrated that happier teachers teach more effectively, leading to heightened student performance, it's essential that we don't prioritize teacher happiness solely based on the benefits that students receive. Teacher wellbeing and fulfilment is affected by the levels of support they enjoy from their schools, their satisfaction with their teaching experience, mental and physical stressors, as well as other factors (Porter, 2020).

Why is it important to take care of the health of teachers?

When speaking of overall health and well-being, very simply, if teachers are struggling with a couple of mental health or bodily health issues, they are not going to be able to

focus on their students—at least, not entirely. If teachers experience depression or anxiety, if their joints are achy,or if they feel physically ill because they do not have the time and resources to rest and nourish themselves, their teaching efficacy will suffer. They will not have the energy to focus on their students, and they will not have the creativity and persistence they would otherwise be able to use for the benefit of those in their care.

In addition, consider the fact that the primary goal of teachers is to help their students grow into happy, healthy, and productive adults. A teacher does this through thoughtful instruction, but a teacher also contributes to this goal by modeling happy, healthy, and productive behaviors. If a teacher is suffering from poor mental or physical health, and it is addressed in a compassionate manner, that can normalize that suffering for students, who may then realize that their own physical and emotional struggles can be acknowledged and managed.

Even young students are suffering, and according to some studies, as high as 25% of grade school students may have “diagnosable mental illness, yet 40% don’t seek help.” (Best Colleges, 2021) Students with undiagnosed mental illnesses have a much harder time learning new information, keeping up with their peers, and mastering the skills necessary to proceed through school. In addition, students with depression and anxiety are much more likely than their peers to simply drop out of school (TwoSigmas, 2019). Teachers who work with these young people on a daily basis often feel frustrated and overwhelmed, which contributes to their own sense of wellbeing.

While the importance of teacher health has not been prioritized in the past, linking teacher health to student health may be an effective way to demonstrate the importance of teacher health within your school district (TwoSigmas, 2019).

Recent studies are showing us that teaching is among the most stressful professions. Educators routinely report that their work conditions and mental health is not good—and recent worldwide events have only exacerbated the situation. Teachers operate under high levels of stress for significant periods of time, often without support and while in fact acting as support for other stressed individuals. Teachers are receiving fewer funds to perform increasingly specialized tasks, and their mental health is dwindling. These trends will cause the teacher shortage to continue and may result in very poor educational outcomes for students over the coming years (TwoSigmas, 2019).

Teachers and Adverse Mental Health Right Now in the United States

What is the current state of teacher wellbeing in the United States?

The past few years have thrown into stark light stressors that had been plaguing teachers for a very long time. It exacerbated existing issues—while creating more. However, it's important to realize that this clearly indicates that teachers have been suffering from mental health issues for years.

In 2020, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence conducted a survey, asking over 5000 United States teachers about their emotional experiences during the pandemic. After tabulating the results, the researchers found that teachers en masse had spent over a year fighting upsetting emotions on a daily basis. These emotions included anxiety, fear, worry, overwhelm, and sadness. Any one of these emotional stressors would have resulted in poor teacher wellbeing; instead, instructors were expected to overperform while battling all five (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

Many of these heightened stressors make sense considering the circumstances. For one, some teachers had to educate not only their students but their own children as well. As one teacher commented, "My vision of finally having someone else take care of my own kids' education, even virtually, was smashed to smithereens. This requires 100% parent involvement, actually 200% because my kids are in two different grades!" (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020)

This required superhuman effort shone a spotlight on teacher wellbeing, which was long overdue. In 2017, three years prior to the onset of the pandemic, researchers conducted a similar study where they surveyed 5000 United States teachers. At that time, the five most common emotions reported were frustration, stress, tiredness, happiness, and feeling overwhelmed. While 'happiness' is obviously a pleasant emotion, the other four aren't positive—even if a sense of daily fear had not yet crept into the average teacher's experience (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

When the 2017 study probed deeper into the reasons, perceived or documented, that teachers felt overwhelmed and stressed, it was noted that teachers felt unsupported. They reported a lack of awareness on the part of their administrations about the resources that they needed. The teachers felt that no one else understood the increasing demands of more and more diverse students, the heightened importance given to testing and testing results, an ever-changing curriculum, and the lack of balance teachers were able to strike between life and work (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

Again, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, a pre-pandemic study found that almost a third of teachers tend to leave the profession and seek other work entirely within the first five years of teaching full-time (Garcia and Weiss, 2019).

Other salient pre-pandemic stats include (Ferguson, 2019):

- 84% of administrative school leaders and nearly 75% percent of school teachers reported themselves as being stressed.
- 49% percent of education professionals stated that their workplace had a negative influence on their ability to optimize their mental health.

An executive of one charity that seeks to provide support for mental health for teachers stated that because of harsh accountability structures, “Overwork has become normalized, and education professionals don’t feel trusted.” Lack of trust and increased work hours are two incredibly detrimental factors when considering optimal mental health. This professional said that a reform of the way that we hold teachers accountable to working hours would be necessary in order to give teachers a chance to relax with, at least, the few free hours that they had (Ferguson, 2019).

The lack of high-quality rest that teachers were experiencing has affected the student and parent experience with school. Prior to the pandemic, we were already seeing a ‘vicious cycle’ of teachers who were experiencing high levels of stress, unconsciously providing a lackluster experience for students as a result, which (of course) led to a lack of enthusiasm or obedience from the student, which (naturally) led to heightened stress for already-overwhelmed teachers (Ferguson, 2019).

How did 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic specifically impact the mental health of teachers and the state of the teacher shortage?

In short, it didn’t help; far from it. One March 2019 study assessed the pressure on educators that the pandemic produced. When the pandemic hit, teachers were expected to make the shift to remote or hybrid instruction very quickly, with hardly any warning, and, in many cases, with little support (Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant, 2020).

In other cases, teachers were expected to continue teaching on-site even through a public health crisis, again, with little support—and little protection. None of this contributed to teacher wellbeing, and it showed (ASCD, 2021):

- Of the public school teachers who decided to leave the profession in early 2020, an overwhelming percentage cited COVID-19 as the reason for their choice.

According to exit surveys, these teachers cited the sudden switch to a remote environment, drastically longer hours, technical glitches that they had to navigate themselves, and other issues as the reasons they quit their jobs.

- Teachers who quit and continued alike noted that their expected work hours increased significantly after the onset of the pandemic, with an average work week approaching sixty hours. (Pre-pandemic, the average teacher workweek was much closer to a traditional forty hours). This increased workload was expected, sudden, and was not, in the majority of cases, associated with any increase in pay.
- Many of the teachers who quit due to the pandemic did so with no job lined up, or took a job with less pay and no insurance or retirement benefits.
- In October of 2020, approximately 25% of surveyed teachers noted that it was likely that they would leave teaching by the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

Going into the pandemic, the United States was already facing a shortage of teachers. If even a fraction of those surveyed (and their peers) go on to follow through with their plans, the teacher shortage and our national ability to support students will worsen considerably (ASCD, 2021).

The Stressors Teachers Routinely Face

What are classic symptoms of stress?

If we can't recognize teacher anxiety and stress, then we'll have a hard time doing anything about it. Here are a few symptoms of the type of stress we need to help teachers avoid:

- Irritation
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Constant headaches
- Recurring insomnia
- Loneliness
- Withdrawal from community
- Conflicts with other people

- Lack of focus
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased desire to skip school

While some of these may be obvious, others are less so. In every case, these symptoms are not fun in themselves, and can also exacerbate other stressors or make it much less pleasant for teachers to do their jobs (American Institute of Stress, 2020).

How can teachers and school communities effectively manage stress?

The road to recovery begins partially with an understanding that every teacher, on balance, is currently both stressed and exhausted. Teachers and administrators both need to learn how to develop and manage emotional skills, particularly the ability to recognize other people's feelings and stressors and understand the consequences of emotional burnout (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Administrators need to listen more to teachers and encourage them to state their needs honestly. Another recent survey, one that asked teachers how they wanted to feel in addition to how they were currently feeling, found that—perhaps unsurprisingly—teachers en masse want to feel respected, supported, effective, inspired, valued, and happy. Administrators must take immediate steps to ensure that teachers are in a better position to experience these feelings. This gap between how teachers feel and how they want to feel presents an enormous opportunity for administrators to support teachers overall and to find a way to make those wished-for emotions a reality. Practical steps that administrators and teachers can take to support general wellbeing will be discussed in a later section of this course (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

What factors lead to teacher stress?

In order to figure out how to support teachers better and reduce their stress as effectively and naturally as possible, it's key to know what the main factors are that lead to teacher stress. Per one study, the most common factors that drive stress just from their students' behavior include (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020):

- Student hostility toward teachers

- Lack of student attention during class
- Student noise during class
- Student lack of effort during class
- Lack of student preparation for class
- Student hyperactivity
- Lack of student regard for school rules
- Students damaging school property
- Students being hostile toward other students
- A student lack of interest in learning

These types of behaviors, which are increasingly common, can induce a great deal of stress and anxiety for teachers.

Students who have mental health issues tend to act out, disengage, or cause disruption in their classrooms. We're learning that at least one in five children will likely have a mental health illness—diagnosed or undiagnosed—over the course of his or her lifetime. Teachers feel a responsibility to help students move through their struggles—and, of course, extremely practically speaking, teachers need to manage the logistics of working with children who have various needs throughout the day. Often, they're doing so without adequate resources, which only heightens teacher stress and makes it impossible to optimize student performance (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Why does emotion management matter in terms of improving or managing teacher stress and wellbeing?

Grade-school classrooms are environments in which emotions can constantly run high. As a result, both teachers and students suffer, especially when emotions escalate and it becomes a chronic situation. Teachers need resources and knowledge to manage the emotions of growing young children, as well as their own emotional states. The more that teachers understand how to manage student emotions and their own, the better that they can provide support for their students and be less stressed themselves (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Emotions may seem superficial, but the types of emotions that one constantly has will impact a person's ability to learn. Crucial mental faculties such as memory and attention are influenced by the type of emotions that a person regularly experiences. If students experience joy and curiosity, for example, those students are more likely to be engaged in what they experience on a day-to-day basis. Conversely, emotions such as fear and anxiety make it really hard for a student to focus on problem sets or dense paragraphs of text. Teachers need to have specific training and resources to help children who are experiencing anxiety and fear, as well as trauma (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

In addition, teachers who are experiencing high levels of stress and emotional strain have a more difficult time making rational, wise decisions. This can impede the learning progress of equally stressed-out students and lead to poor educational outcomes. Giving teachers the tools necessary to understand and support their own emotions as well as those of the young people in their care will be absolutely critical over the coming years in order to give teachers a fighting chance at success—not to mention health, happiness, and wellbeing (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Why do administrators need to take more ownership over the well-being of both students and teachers?

Giving teachers the informative resources to care for themselves and their students is very important. However, that also places an additional responsibility on already-overworked teachers to take on yet more work. In order to create lasting, impactful change that actually benefits those who need it most, school administrators need to take responsibility for the wellbeing of every person in their educational communities (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

One professor who has spent years studying teacher wellbeing has said: "Administrators set the tone in their building for how teachers are perceived and supported. Prioritizing teacher well-being and giving higher rates of recognition and positive feedback to teachers versus criticism and judgment helps set a positive tone." (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020)

In order to make teacher wellbeing a true priority, we need to not only give them professional development, supportive programs, and other needed resources, we need to work hard to provide them with the downtime, space, and respite they need to thrive. We also need to invest in the beauty and ergonomics of our environments to

keep them healthy and bright—for both students and teachers (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

What does the research say are the specific chronic stressors that teachers face?

For better or for worse, teacher wellbeing has come into the limelight in the past several years. Several institutes have begun long-ranging studies into the needs that teachers have and the chronic stressors that they face. According to at least one recent study, the most universal sources of heightened stress that serve to directly combat teacher wellbeing are (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018):

- Increasingly unrealistic daily demands of their job
- The limited resources that teachers have to accomplish their set goals
- The lack of professional development teachers often have
- The lack of personal autonomy that teachers enjoy with respect to their career trajectory
- Poor school climates

Over the past few decades, the academic world has narrowed its focus from holistic student achievement to student test scores. This provides teachers with very clear, if unrealistic, goals. Teachers are expected to assist their students in achieving ever-higher test scores. If students fail to accomplish this (increasingly unrealistic) goal, the scrutiny for this perceived failure falls more and more on teachers (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Teachers are also expected to navigate mental health crises with the students directly suffering from them. Teachers need to meet the unique demands and needs of the families of each of their students, which can involve considerable time and effort to be able to understand complex family dynamics. As the trend toward diverse, personalized teaching styles continues, teachers are expected to produce consistently creative, engaging educational experiences for stressed students without much support to do so from their schools (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Lack of school support for teachers is also increasingly pervasive. The focus is on the students (and their scores); teachers are expected to work toward the perceived best benefit for their students, determined by state, district, and administrative guidelines, without having much say in what the greatest benefits should be. According to another

study, teachers overwhelmingly feel like their opinions do not matter at all while they are at work—a factor that directly impacts whether professionals are likely to feel satisfied with their careers (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Finally, when teachers feel like they are unable to meet the holistic needs of their students, teachers suffer, as well. If a student is going through a tough time at home, needs specialized support at school, or otherwise requires additional care, their teacher is meant to be one of the first people to notice and recommend a plan of action. However, many teachers simply do not have the experience, knowledge, or the resources themselves to provide care for their students—which, clearly, is not in the benefit of the student, but also wreaks havoc on the teacher's mental health (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

What are the direct costs if teachers are struggling in this area?

We know that when teachers are overly stressed, this leads to poor outcomes for students—and, of course, for the stressed teachers themselves . However, what are those direct repercussions?

The long-term effects of chronic stress can be devastating. The short-term effects of acute stress can also make it much more difficult for teachers to support their students well. The costs of teacher stress and poor teacher wellbeing can include:

- Poor health outcomes for teachers, including depression, anxiety, headaches, issues with sleeping, daily fatigue, increased irritability, and difficulty focusing on their projects, tasks, and students (Spencer, 2018).

- Increased teacher absences, including prolonged vacations, sick leave, or instances where teachers simply quit due to their poor experiences. Those teachers who do not proactively choose to take time to rest will require a greater amount of time to recover when their stress catches up to them, so, even if the teachers in your school district are not doing this or are not allowed to do this, teacher absences will build up over time (Spencer, 2018).

- Increased use of substitute teachers, which directly costs schools large sums of money and results in poor, disjointed, and less effective experiences for elementary school students. Increased teacher turnover also means that schools need to spend more effort recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers—which costs time and money, and also results in a potentially subpar experience for students in need of consistent support (Spencer, 2018).

- Teachers' stress gets passed on to their students in at least some form (and, usually, in several forms). If teachers are chronically stressed, their students usually begin to feel an increased level of mental and emotional strain—and the adverse physical symptoms of stress are passed to a young, growing population. This will both indirectly and directly affect students' ability to thrive during their formative years (Bolkan, 2018).

What does research say about the specific needs that teachers have right now—post-pandemic, but also just for the best outcome regardless?

The 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many weaknesses in current school systems. In order to move past this crisis in the best way possible, it will be necessary to learn from the hardships of the pandemic to provide more support in the ways students and teachers find most crucial.

With the rapid shift to remote or distance learning triggered by the Covid-19 response, many existing inequalities among schools in the nation (and even within specific communities) came to light. These harsh realizations expose many ways that teachers need to be supported. Among these include the following (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti, 2020):

- When educators nationwide had to figure out how to support students and families through remote-only solutions, it quickly became clear that there were gaps in teacher training for this type of occurence. Teachers realized that although they received some support in learning how to set up basic remote classrooms, they did not have the support or training necessary to meet the needs of every group of students—particularly, those students with disabilities or students without reliable internet access.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers who were able to continue teaching reported that they were not able to complete all of the intended activities per their curriculum due to heightened time spent troubleshooting technical details and scrambling to provide remote solutions for their families. This resulted in lackluster educational experiences for their students.

- Principals, students, and families alike noted the distinct lack of hands-on learning for students during the pandemic, which caused teachers to struggle to brainstorm at-home activities for remote students. Teachers also noted that a large part of their job, being able to support and assess the emotional and social well-being of their students, depended on personal contact. As such, teachers worried that they

were not able to monitor their students' health and happiness in the way they'd been able to previously, which caused heightened strain for the teachers.

- While many schools across the nation professed goals to be more prepared for the next emergency and to increase resources for student and teacher mental health, many schools have emerged from the pandemic with no concrete plans to make this happen.

The same study provided recommendations for school districts in the wake of the pandemic. These recommendations included (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti, 2020):

- Consistent, comprehensive professional development for teachers, including preparation and background support for the complexities of distance learning. This includes training for teachers who will be expected to support and teach vulnerable groups of students in a remote capacity.

- Local policymakers (and academic funders) need to make sure that there is practical support for those who may not have access to the resources necessary for remote learning, including internet connectivity and reliable technology. Administrations also need to ensure that high-quality classroom materials are available to distribute to each child in a timely manner, whether through physical shipments, easily accessible pickup locations, or simply through easy-to-navigate online access.

- Educators also realized that they will need help brainstorming and executing strategies to keep students engaged and motivated throughout long periods of remote learning. Schools need to help teachers and students alike source hands-on opportunities such as labs and internships that are locally available to the students, as well as community-centric opportunities.

- The pandemic revealed that many schools do not have the communication infrastructure in place for teachers to quickly contact families and schools in the event of an emergency. School administrations need to create better communication plans and ensure they have updated contact information at all times for everyone involved.

Researchers are also expecting that 2021 and beyond will bring key challenges in terms of teacher wellness. These challenges include (Repta, 2021):

- **Ergonomics**. While proper ergonomics for teachers has always been an issue, in 2020, the shift to at-home ad-hoc teaching setups meant that teachers were often

forced to resort to sitting in uncomfortable kitchen chairs and at slightly too-high dining room tables. At home, our arrangements are often meant for either aesthetics or comfort—not for long work hours. Changing rapidly to this new, less-optimal structure created physical challenges for teachers that have already resulted in painful issues. Even teachers who are back in classrooms tend to spend lots of time sitting, and increasingly less time moving around. This reduced physicality leads to pain and suffering, especially if a teacher needs to sit in an awkward posture due to poor equipment or forced angles. Between bad seating options, inappropriate tech setups, and other poor instances of implemented ergonomics, teachers are not exactly set up well to have great bodily health when teaching.

- **Vocal health**. Many physical therapists are noticing that they are getting new referrals for teachers who need help with their voices. Over 2020 and 2021, teachers were asked to teach with, in some cases, at least one or two physical barriers between them and their students—e.g., a mask, a plastic wall, or even a computer with a less-than-optimal microphone (or students at home with suboptimal speakers). In addition, their students wore masks, which can also make it more difficult to hear what others are saying. This has caused teachers to need to speak up loudly and repeat themselves often. Teachers already had an extremely vocal job; these heightened barriers and requirements did not help. Some teachers have been able to put in requests for voice amplification systems—or even, simply, microphone upgrades—but tight school budgets have not traditionally had room for such perceived luxuries, especially not in the time of a pandemic. Advocates for teachers are now pointing out that even expensive voice amplification systems are less costly than waves of teachers who need to take time to recover due to voice dysfunction. Practical workshops to help teachers recover from voice dysfunction or to exercise their voices properly and safely—through targeted exercises and appropriate training, as well as mandatory and observed vocal rest periods—should also be a strategy that schools follow to protect teachers' voices.

- **Trauma**. While the entire world will sustain at least some measure of trauma from the pandemic, the specific type of trauma that teachers experienced will leave a mark on them for years to come. It's important to remember that everyone reacts to trauma differently. Teachers who broke down and quit during or after COVID-19 were manifesting one reaction to trauma. The teachers who stayed on were not necessarily less traumatized, and the most dramatic effects of their trauma could

be yet to come. Between the constant fears that everyone faced related to COVID-19, the minute-by-minute changes that teachers were not only expected to react to but guide others through, and the fact that many teachers were asked or required to work outside their comfort or safety zones, teachers have experienced an incredibly challenging year. Schools need to expect waves of resultant trauma reactions. While every school year presents its challenges, in 2020-2021 teachers feared for their lives. Many felt trapped in their jobs or felt like they weren't in control of the support they could give to their students. It will be vital to be proactive about making sure that teachers (a population perhaps unused to asking for support) have the resources they need to cope. Schools need to validate their fears and take steps to place protective measures in place so teachers can feel confident and creative again. Even if administrators or parents feel like these measures are no longer needed, the goal should be to alleviate the trauma response of all teachers before considering the pandemic to be a thing of the past. One concrete step that administrators could take to help teachers in this way is to consider allowing teachers to teach in the venue or format most comfortable for them. If this is not possible, consider having a temporary trauma counselor on staff, and prioritize giving teachers enough time to meet with this professional as needed.

- **Burnout**. While all teachers are in danger of burning out, the higher stressors and workloads associated with the pandemic have only accelerated the timeline in which most teachers meet that threshold. For one example: Teachers didn't get the (very necessary) emotional break in 2020 that they needed to fuel the 2020-2021 school year—leading to depleted energy stores, which, in many cases, simply made it impossible to get through the school year, either at all or with any semblance of pre-pandemic success. The heightened anxiety and increased responsibilities associated with being a teacher during the pandemic meant that many teachers did not, in effect, get summer, winter, or spring breaks. One poll of a thousand American teachers, taken between the months of August and September 2020, found that most teachers rated their readiness and rested-ness to start the school year at an all-time low. (In most years, the majority of teachers, given a similar poll, felt a high percentage of readiness to jump back in. In 2020, most teachers rated their readiness at less than 5 on a scale of one to ten). Starting a pandemic school year already overwhelmed, stressed, and depleted will not and has not ended well for teachers. Continuing this trend of burnout will increase the teacher shortage, and it will be necessary for schools to prioritize teacher rest and recharging. In the next section of this course, we will examine

potential ways that schools can practically provide this type of support (Repta, 2021).

Section 1: Reflection Questions

- What would you say is the average state of wellbeing of the teachers in your school?
- Do you think that the students in your school are suffering as a result?
- Are any of the direct stressors that your teachers are facing potentially easy to solve?
- Does your school have any room in its budget to focus on even smaller teacher wellness upgrades?
- Is your school facing a teacher shortage? Why?
- Does your school have adequate supports in place for new or suffering teachers?
- Think about the past year. What specific stressors did your teachers have to face due to COVID-19? How many of those stressors will still be factors going forward?

Section 1: Key Points

- Teacher wellbeing is connected to student performance.
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted numerous stressors that teachers face and exacerbated many, but stress and burnout are issues teachers have been facing for a very long time.
- Working to support teachers and help them through times of stress requires an understanding of both mental stressors—e.g., symptoms and factors of burnout—and physical stressors—e.g., voice overuse and poor ergonomics.
- There are direct costs—including financial costs—of a lack of support for teacher wellbeing.
- It is very possible for teachers to be stressed at a problematic level without necessarily being aware that they are in need of help.

Section 1: Summary and Conclusion

While teaching has never been easy, the sudden requirements and quick changes in direction triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it very clear that intervention is needed in order to avoid driving teachers away from their jobs. This intervention cannot come only through suggestions to teachers to increase their self-care practices on top of their ever-growing workloads. Schools and administrators need to focus on real change and getting teachers concrete resources and support that will invest in teacher care in a practical way. This will lead to benefits for the entire academic community. It's crucial to realize that teacher stress is multifaceted, actually harmful, and has been increasingly growing over the past years; it isn't just a 'pandemic thing,' and if we don't take action, a lack of support for teacher wellbeing will contribute to a widespread lack of healthy, experienced teachers ready to nurture the next generation of learners.

Section 2: How to Safeguard the Well-Being of Teachers: For Teachers and for School Administrators

As we've seen, the health and well-being of teachers is directly linked to the success of their teaching abilities; yet, teacher health and happiness is far from the priority that it should be. Furthermore, when any type of solution for teacher stress does come into the limelight, the only solutions proposed tend to focus on the idea that a teacher is responsible for his or her own levels of stress. According to many, all teachers need to do is increase exercise, meditate, join a support group, or manage their time and emotions better in order to be healthy and happy (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

While, of course, these types of self-care actions certainly don't hurt, the fact that they exacerbate the idea that teacher wellbeing is the sole responsibility of each individual teacher may be hurting teacher health trends as a whole. Schools need to be aware that elements of their own institutional structures and environments may be the direct cause of teacher stress, and, as such, that institutional change (or heightened institutional support) is the most helpful way to help teachers thrive (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

It's time to learn more about teacher wellness and promote self-care as well as strategic institutional changes. Teachers should have the time to take care of themselves as well as the support and resources they need for mental and physical health, professional development, and classroom proficiency (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Here are several ways that schools and administrators can work to help support teachers through stressful times and situations—and, critically, reduce stressors overall. We don't have to wait for teachers to be overextended and suffering to show them the care they deserve. For example, many schools are proactively taking steps to address systemic issues that often result in teacher stress (as well as other adverse effects, such as lowered value to students). These powerful upgrades that smart schools are making and recommend are:

- **Create support and mentorship programs at your school.** There are only a few states in the nation that require schools to support their new teachers with special attention. Many schools do, anyway, regardless of state rules, but the fact that it isn't a requirement allows for a lack of uniformity of onboarding experiences—and means that this type of support is the first thing to go in the face of, for example, a global pandemic. In the past, researchers have reported that establishing mentorship practices and support programs at schools is effective in helping increase the satisfaction of teachers, lower the rates at which teachers leave schools, and even boost test scores for students due to more efficiency and efficacy on the part of the teachers (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

- **Start by protecting your teachers' most basic needs.** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs clearly states that we cannot expect teachers to carry out higher functions such as creativity and support for others if they're struggling with very primal needs and emotions such as fear, anxiety, or even hunger or illness. As you're thinking about implementing upgrades to invest in teacher wellness, start with very simple gestures that will impact your teachers every single day. For example, consider scheduling time for teachers to have sole access to the bathroom, or (if resources allow) designate one bathroom as adults-only. If you have any new mothers among your staff, give them the time and private space to pump milk. If you don't have the resources for a dramatic refresh of the teacher's lounge, at least prioritize a regular supply of good coffee, hot chocolate, and a thrifted couch or two so your teachers can feel comfortable (Farber, 2020).

- **Build acknowledgment and community-building efforts into your more practical, logistics-oriented meetings.** Teachers need community; they also need to feel like their perpetual hard work is being acknowledged, and students don't always provide this affirmation. You can invest in teacher community and teacher affirmation by setting aside a few minutes at the beginning of each staff meeting

for celebrating recent accomplishments, sharing stories about recent achievements, or just taking time to connect as human beings. Starting off community and teacher relationships on a high note will make it easier for teachers to reach out to their colleagues later when they need support to make it through more difficult chapters of their teaching career (Farber, 2020).

- **Survey your teachers regularly—and act on the results of the surveys.** Sometimes the quickest way to know what change needs to be enacted is to simply ask. Instead of imposing stress-reducing changes that your administrators think would help teachers, ask the teachers what changes they would like to see! Of course, your school will receive some impossible requests; but your school will also receive many actionable suggestions that will improve the lives of the entire teaching staff. Create an online wellness-focused survey, and send it out to your school's teachers on a regular basis. Commit to fully analyzing the results of the survey and making changes to implement teacher suggestions or working in the direction of those suggestions. In some school districts that have implemented regular teacher wellness surveys, concrete post-survey changes have included regular quick lectures for the teachers on teacher-chosen subjects (including positive psychology and mindfulness); an on-site or virtual yoga instructor, and a quickly-assembled yoga corner in the staff lounge; and quicker, more efficient staff meetings (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure your teachers have the option to take a break when they really need to.** In one school system in Nashville, the teaching staff has gone the extra mile to ensure teacher relief when needed through the creation of a 'tap out' system. Through this system, if a teacher gets overwhelmed over the course of the day, the teacher can send an SOS text and another teacher will come to manage the classroom for a brief respite (five or so minutes). Often, this is enough time for stressed-out teachers to gather themselves enough to keep on going through the day, instead of having to be 'on' all the time (Pole, 2020).

- **Don't be picky about the way teachers spend their time—or about tracking teacher work hours.** With modern teaching, we can usually assume that teachers spend a lot of extra time working, even if we don't see it. As one expert put it, teachers—usually without argument, with tacit understanding—"put in an incredible number of hours early in the morning, late at night, and during the weekend." Because we know this is the case, it would be a nice (and logically merited) teacher perk to enjoy some slack in terms of tracking work hours or

mandatory time spent on the school campus (or visibly online). As long as it's evident that a teacher is managing his or her job functions well and is there for the students, schools should not place an added stress on the teachers to be present for forty hours a week or place additional time-tracking to-dos on their plate (Pole, 2020).

- **Check-in with your teachers quickly, informally, and regularly.** Instead of having stressful one-on-ones between administrators and teaching staff on an infrequent basis, prioritize a relationship and rapport between administrators and teachers that involves frequent conversations about workload and well-being. This shows that administrators care about teachers as humans and that a twice-yearly check-in is not just another part of an administrator's to-do list. Especially if these meetings are spontaneous or informal, an administrator should always open these quick conversations with something positive, and end by offering and planning practical support (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure that your teachers have scheduled planning time.** A modern teacher's work life is continuing to grow, blurring the lines constantly between work life and personal time. More and more, teachers are expected to be available for students or be actively teaching during their 'regular' 40-hour week, with planning and providing less active student support expected outside of regular hours. Teachers need time to relax, decompress, and spend time with their families during their personal time—they don't need extra hours of unpaid work. In one Nashville school, the principal recognized this and developed a teacher schedule that included regular blocks of teacher time (while other teachers managed groups of classrooms engaged in quiet study) so groups of teachers could actively collaborate and prep during the workday. He ensured similar blocks of teacher downtime during the day to give teachers access to professional development. As the principal noted, this decision took some creative planning but was ultimately a win-win which "improves our school's instructional capacity, student learning, and culture and climate." (Gonser, 2021)

- **Create a climate of wellness and self-care.** Administrators can remind teachers of the importance of self-care and anti-stress practices as much as they like, but it's important to create an atmosphere where taking a moment to care for oneself is routine. As administrators, you need to both set an example for this type of lifestyle and realize that you need to step in and make it possible for teachers to do so as well. For example, it's a good idea to encourage teachers to set

boundaries around their personal time by not answering emails during the evenings and weekends; so refrain from sending emails or make it very clear that you do not expect answers during those periods of time. Offer your teachers a fifteen-minute break to take a walk across campus during the day, and, as an administrator, make sure that you do so yourself as well to normalize the practice (as long as you've offered to help other teachers do so as well) (Gonser, 2021).

- **Look for visible signs of stress among your staff.** It may be the case that you have on your teaching staff individuals who don't like asking for help or don't realize how stressed they are. It can be difficult to realize this on one's own, and many teachers are extremely ambitious, extroverted people who don't like to admit that they need a moment of quiet. If you know that someone on your staff needs help but may not be ready to ask for it, find a creative way to get them the support they need without being condescending. For example, you could invite them to lead the teaching staff in a (very simple, mostly silent) meditation; you could ask them to proctor an easy exam so they have a minute to relax; you could ask other teachers to help reduce their workload, or you could even be more direct and just give that teacher a little extra time off. Doing so may require more effort on your part and on the part of the teachers providing support, but could reduce the chances of the stressed teacher burning out or getting very ill without much notice (Gonser, 2021).

- **Dedicate time to answer teacher questions at the end of each of your school meetings.** There are some districts that already do this very well, but there are others where teachers constantly feel like they don't have enough information to do their jobs because the staff atmosphere isn't conducive to asking practical questions on a routine basis. Administrators need to be prepared to answer staff questions, even if they feel like they're answering the same inquiries constantly. (Administrators should also read between the lines, if this is the case, and take steps to provide proactive support if certain questions are brought up on a repeating basis) (Pole, 2020).

- **Whenever possible, give your teachers the choice to educate as they see fit.** If your teachers can choose—when it makes sense—to offer in-person or online instruction, to organize their lessons in a certain way, or to make other necessary adjustments regarding their teaching practices, that will both make their lives easier and help them be willing to work with more hard-set administrative rules when they do exist (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure that staff and educators feel safe - and give them space and time to heal together.** Having a staff of teachers that is cohesive and communicates well because they go through common experiences together is invaluable for a school. Sometimes, schools (and teachers) tend to focus too much or exclusively on the creation of strong, valuable relationships between students and teachers. Any professional connections between staff members are expected to occur on their own time. However, modern teachers barely have any free time; when they're at school, they're typically expected to be teaching or on-call for student support, and in free moments teachers tend to grade papers or prepare for class so they don't have to do that while at home. One small school in Nashville decided that a strong staff with emotional and social connections was worth prioritizing. This school set aside a specific time during a teacher's school day to engage in small teacher groups as a way to ensure that each teacher has adult support during the day. This helps teachers grow professionally, develop higher emotional and social skills, and helps them feel supported by their peers—key markers of people who are happy in general, but particularly at work! Teachers who have been part of this experience have reported that they feel liberated and validated. In these teacher circles, they have the chance to share what's working for them and what isn't—and they often find that they can share work or partner up with other teachers to serve students more efficiently, simply because they're more aware of the challenges everyone is facing (Kent Teach, 2019).
- **Give teachers a way to assess their own stress levels to see them growing or fading over time.** We can assume that teachers are stressed. In the post-pandemic era, this is a particularly safe bet. However, teachers themselves often tend to overlook their own wellbeing to focus more on their students—it's a self-effacing characteristic that has led many caring people to want to be teachers in the first place. Giving teachers some kind of objective assessment, metric, or data to help them realize how stressed they are and that they need help can enable teachers to justify taking the time to take care of themselves. Teachers who are well aware of their stress can benefit from this type of assessment, too—as hard data can often be used to legitimize self-care strategies, particularly for those who might consider teacher self-care a waste of time or something that should happen solely when teachers are at home. One school system in Wisconsin decided to learn more about the science of well-being and the ways people can grow their wellness skills. They theorized that academic skills can be learned—so, naturally, self-care ones can be learned as well. This school made an app available to their teaching staff that supported teacher well-being through guided daily practices that were

developed according to the principles of learning science, and they decided to track biological and mental signs of stress among their staff for fifteen weeks. After the fifteen-week period ended, the teachers at their school reported lower psychological distress, less loneliness, more self-compassion and mindfulness, and more excitement about their purpose as teachers at their school (Kent Teach, 2019).

- **Provide teachers with the opportunity for professional development—but the right type of professional development.** Giving teachers the opportunity to grow their skills and advance in their careers is integral to teacher happiness and well-being, and teachers should have the ability to choose to specialize in anything that they find practical and meaningful. Along these lines, one school in Indianapolis decided to take this idea a step further and train all willing staff members in specific student-centric connection and well-being strategies—teaching the staff about best practices for navigating trauma and instability, and how to guide students through an uncertain time. The teachers who went through this program reported that they felt better equipped to provide their students with more holistic academic support and mentorship. When students asked questions of them, the teachers were better prepared to provide mindful answers. While this investment did not directly contribute to teacher wellness, it did so indirectly because teachers were more informed about how to manage trauma responses and lead people through uncertainty and they felt better equipped to provide care for their struggling students (Kent Teach, 2019).
- **Give teachers the science-based tools they need to reliably build healthy, happy relationships.** So much of successful teaching depends on the relationships a teacher is able to forge. Their students will learn from them better if they feel like they can trust their teacher, for example, and teachers will feel happier and more supported if they feel like they're connected with their fellow teachers. However, building relationships can be hard. It doesn't necessarily come easily for every personality, and even outgoing people have days where they find it tougher to reach out and solidify relationships with people in their environment. One school district realized that the relationships in its school were too important to leave up to chance. The school administrators decided to redesign the way that they built their learning environments as well as the ways that they supported their teachers with resources to prioritize relationship formation—based on the science behind this concept. Much like the previous example, this school decided to give all interested teachers access to a professional development seminar addressing the

science behind relationships, and how relationships can contribute to a strong foundation for effective learning. The school also made resources available to teachers that helped them understand (and reference) the ways that emotions are linked to cognition and, ultimately, to human connection. The teachers learned more about stress and bonding hormones, why safety and belonging are vital parts of a child's school experience, and more essential contexts that the brain needs in order to learn properly. This school also decided to invest more into research on developmental relationships and other ways to expand the support its teachers could offer students and each other. For example, it gave teacher-specific guidance to help form crucial relationships—such as the best way to express concern for a student, fun yet empathetic ways to check in on students, and the most efficient ways to challenge others to grow in a caring way (Kent Teach, 2019).

- **Make it clear that perfectionism is not the goal for your staff.** As perfection is not achievable, striving for it generally only leads to overwhelming, unattainable standards for already-stressed teachers. Try your best to encourage a culture of celebration for the things that your staff has been able to do right, and foster creative growth through mistakes when they inevitably occur (Kent Teach, 2019).

Addressing Obstacles and Concerns as Administrators Improve Conditions For Their Staff

Increasing the health and happiness of your teachers is not something that will happen in one month, semester, or year—it will be an ongoing project that you'll need to consistently refuel and re-evaluate over time. Here are a few tips to make your project as feasible as possible in the face of common obstacles (Kaiser, 2020):

- At the beginning of your teacher wellness initiative, establish set goals that are measurable and specific—e.g., creating a tap-out system or upgrading the teacher's lounge area—that have deadlines attached to them. Also set calendar dates in the future with reminders that will prompt you and your staff to take stock of how much you've been able to accomplish.

- Use employee feedback more often and more strategically. Incorporate suggestions from teachers and staff into each program you launch and each upgrade you make.

- As you move through planned changes and upgrades, assess the resources that you already have available in your community. Take advantage of internal skill sets

and any relationships your school already has. For example, if one of your teachers is a proficient yogi, ask that individual (and provide compensation and time) to lead the others in lunchtime flows.

- Consult with the health plan provider that your school uses. In many cases, it's simply not feasible to offer teachers better healthcare or more varied options. However, in some cases, it is—and even if it requires some tough budgetary decisions, doing this can both show teachers that you value them and literally make it possible for them to take optimal care of themselves.

How to Write an Effective Teacher Emotion Management or Wellbeing Survey that's Designed to Work

It will be key for your success to spend time crafting a survey that will actually help you help your teachers. Your teachers need to feel heard—and you need to have good data to work with to make sure that your updates and changes are as effective as possible (Spencer, 2018).

If you're writing a survey, here are some simple tips to make sure that it's as actionable as possible (Spencer, 2018):

- Keep it short. Teachers are busy.
- While prioritizing brevity, include a succinct message at the top of the survey stating its purpose. Tell teachers that you will be using their answers to make practical changes around your school (and then follow up on that).
- Make sure that it's very clear that the surveys you distribute are entirely anonymous.
- Include a clear mix of questions that are about very short-term, actionable changes—desired perks that may be available in the teacher lounge, or strategies to address specific stressors that teachers anticipate over the next month—and a few questions that are much more overarching, regarding the next few years of planned strategic upgrades or investments.
- Include some logistics-centric questions, both to convey that you're really planning teacher wellness benefits and to help you actually execute your plans. For example, you could poll your employees about the times they have available for a trauma seminar, or you could ask them on which day of the week they'd rather have access to a mental health professional.

How can teachers manage self-care themselves and work towards supporting their fellow teachers?

While it is critical to shine the light on things that administrators and schools could focus on so as not to require teachers to do even more than they're already doing, it would be remiss not to address a few strategies that teachers can adopt in order to boost their own well-being. The following suggestions address practical ways that teachers can work to manage their own self-care and help fellow teachers who may be struggling as well, when they have the ability to do so (McClintock, 2020).

- **Focus on controlling the controllable.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers were tasked with the impossible. They often experienced heightened anxiety because there was simply too much to do. Even in non-pandemic years, it's impossible to predict or manage how you spend every second of your time, or what will happen in the near or far future. Things that you can control include your mindset, what is and is not on your priority list, what you watch and listen to, the way you cultivate and protect your mindset, and how you move your body (even if you only have a few minutes each day to dedicate to exercise or meditation, for example). It can help boost happiness to concentrate on the things that we can control and work on our priorities as much as possible while letting go of things that either don't matter as much or are simply not in our control.
- **Prioritize self-care and mental health, even if you don't feel like you are having issues in this area.** This is a situation in which a pound of prevention is worth an ounce of cure. As stated elsewhere in this course, the people who go into teaching are often naturally geared toward focusing on and helping other people. You may not spend a lot of time considering your own mental health. Now's a great time to start. Whether it's helpful to speak with your loved ones about your mental health, prioritize daily movement, or even just put together calming or happy music playlists, all teachers likely need to consciously invest a little in their own health and happiness. It's clear that schools need to revamp their own systems in order to make sure that teachers have more resources and more time, but it's also important for teachers to realize that prioritizing actions such as spending even a short time on a hobby they love on weekends is important—and related to the quality of one's mental health.
- **Be as compassionate toward yourself as you can be.** Particularly if you happen to have tendencies toward low self-esteem, it can be very easy to focus on the mistakes you've made or the things you aren't able to do right now. As much as

possible, try to avoid doing this. Think about the goals that you're working toward, the things you are able to do well, and the people you're helping by showing up to your job every day. Even if it seems insignificant, the way we talk to ourselves and think about our accomplishments matters a great deal. At the very least, if you're able to practice and model self-compassion, you'll be better able to do the same for the others around you.

- **Prioritize reasonable expectations.** If you're being asked to do more, you simply won't be able to get everything done that you've been able to do in the past. If you're being asked to learn something new and perform a new task at the same time, you're not going to do it perfectly the first time. Consider your workload and your aptitude as honestly as you can, as well as your energy and your emotional health levels. With all of this information in mind, set realistic goals that are accomplishable—and repeat this exercise on a frequent basis. Heightened expectations followed by reasonable underperformance lead to increased angst, anxiety, and self-esteem issues that could have been otherwise avoided. If someone else is placing unreasonable expectations upon you, it may be time to discuss healthy, acceptable expectations with that person so that you aren't sprinting to get things done all the time—a surefire recipe for burnout.

- **Learn how to communicate well.** One cause of unreasonable expectations is poor communication or miscommunication. Part of communicating well is telling your colleagues and supervisors when you're having a difficult time. This may not feel good; it requires vulnerability, trust, and a supportive working environment. However, reaching out to someone who you feel you can trust and letting that individual know that you are struggling will likely result in help coming your way (and, at the very least, will result in you no longer feeling alone or like you're keeping an increasingly-pressurized secret).

- **Don't apologize unless an apology is truly appropriate.** Much of the time, young professionals—teachers included—apologize for things that aren't really problems, or aren't really their fault. As you're evaluating ways to improve your communication skills, consider thinking about how often you apologize, and think about ways you can lower that number. Apologizing may seem like a good way to end a conversation about a problem, but it ingrains in people's minds that you were actually at fault for the problem, even if you were just saying it to be nice. Even worse, after apologizing all the time, it's easy for us to start subconsciously thinking that perhaps we were at fault. It's certainly a good practice to apologize

for things we do that hurt or inconvenienced others (or at other times in which apologies would logically follow), but try to avoid saying you are sorry simply as a nicety or a way to end a conversation.

- **Try to set aside a dedicated workspace for your teaching activities.** Having a dedicated workspace can help you be more productive—and it can also help you shift more easily to rest and time with your family after a day of work, especially when working from home. Having enough room to have a designated workspace may not be possible, but doing something to physically shift from work to your personal life can help you create and enjoy that mythological balance. If you're able to set aside a corner in your home for your desk and computer, excellent; but, even putting on a literal 'work hat', walking around your home with shoes on when you're 'at work', or something else to that effect can help let your brain know which hours of the day are work hours, and which are more geared for rest and relaxation, can help you stop thinking about work when the work day is over.

- **Set hours and create healthy boundaries.** If you're working from home or if you enjoy a more flexible work schedule, enjoy that framework—don't allow your school or your colleagues to interpret that as 'you work all the time.' Make it clear to your coworkers and your students the specific hours you can be reached. Also, make it clear that you will not be quick about answering emails outside of office hours or on the weekend. If your school has a culture in which this is expected, it might be time to work with your fellow teachers to have a conversation about the detrimental effects of zero downtime with your school's administration.

- **Work with a therapist, even if you don't believe that it's necessary for you to do so.** A therapist can help you identify stressors, establish ways to move more healthily through a stressful time, and even monitor your mental health to ensure that you're able to take action or take advantage of intervention strategies before anything truly harmful occurs. Your health is worth the time it takes to go see a therapist on at least an infrequent basis. Check with your school's healthcare provider as more and more health plans are including at least introductory therapy sessions. Not surprisingly, this particular practice has become increasingly more common in the past year.

What trends can we expect going forward in terms of teacher needs, health, and wellbeing?

As we move forward, we have the opportunity to both learn from what has happened in the past and meet or get ready for the new challenges that the future has in store for us. To help learn from the past and meet new trends with confidence, experts have taken time to predict mental health challenges and paradigm shifts that we will all shortly encounter. Some of these trends and challenges are (McClintock, 2020):

- **We will see budgetary line items that indicate the prioritization of employee mental health.** As study after study is successfully able to link staff health and happiness to productivity and output, employers—including school administrators—are realizing that it's worth it to very literally invest in their staff's wellbeing. One study recently out of the American Psychological Association found that companies that support their employees' mental health with practical benefits, tools, and strategies enjoy 53% more motivation from their studies. Another study out of Deloitte saw a return on investment of 400% in terms of workplace mental health tools and strategies. While these particular studies were not teacher-centric, schools that invest in staff wellness will likely see similarly increased outputs.

- **We will see an increase in employee resource groups.** For teachers, in particular, the line between work and personal life is blurring. Aspects and factors of employee and teacher life that were previously kept strictly compartmentalized are, for better or worse, merging. While organizations and companies across the board are urging employees and teachers to place boundaries between work and personal life in order to maintain balance, other workplaces are leaning into this work-life status quo—in hopefully beneficial ways. One such way is through the creation of employee resource groups. These smaller employee communities allow employees to connect with other people in their workplace who share interests or experiences. These types of groups—also known as affinity groups—could range from groups for parents to LGBTQ ally groups to groups that provide mental health support. Employee- or teacher-centric support or resource groups should not replace administrative efforts to support teaching staff but can provide teacher-teacher support as a parallel strategy.

- **It's expected that mental health will start to be a 'dinner table' conversation among families, especially those with school-age students.** As a result of this shift in mental health awareness and acceptance, younger classes of students will be

equipped with behavioral health knowledge and vocabulary that teachers have not seen in the past. This can be a good thing, but can also raise expectations on teachers to provide mental health support for their students while suffering from stressors themselves.

- **Teacher wellness will receive more of the limelight.** As one of the groups of professed unsung heroes of the pandemic, teachers received heightened appreciation, at least for a time, from parents nationwide who were suddenly tasked with assisting with their children's education. At the same time, however, the increased demands on teachers led to teacher burnout and educators leaving their jobs en masse. This juxtaposition of appreciation, higher stress, and a mass exodus of educators have led at least some districts to realize that they need systems in place to protect their most important asset—teachers. Because of this, we do expect to see at least some increased teacher support in the way of more funding for professional development and greater support for mental health within school districts.
- **We'll see an increased focus on mental health education.** Going forward, researchers believe that students and teachers alike will receive a more targeted and holistic (as well as, hopefully, practical) education on mental health. Whether this comes in the form of professional development for teachers, expanded health classes for students, or school-wide seminars is unclear; however, the impacts of trauma and stress on students and teachers alike make it clear that school communities need to shed greater light on the importance of mental health. In the future, we believe that schools will see that mental health education is a way to make sure that students have access to the skills necessary to keep themselves happy and healthy--and to ensure the same outcome for their peers. This will help give the next generation of teachers the skills to thrive throughout the next large-scale stressful situation that our communities encounter.

Section 2: Reflection Questions

- Did any of these practical suggestions regarding teacher support and stress reduction surprise you?
- Is your school already targeting any of these strategies?
- Do any of these seem impossible? Why or why not? If they do seem impossible, is there anything you and your school can do to work toward ensuring these strategies are possible?

- Which of these strategies do you think would have the largest impact in your school? Why?
- Is there any way that you and your school can start to prepare for the next challenges or wellbeing trend that we see coming? What about unforeseen challenges?

Section 2: Key Points

- Obtaining, listening to, and acting upon teacher feedback is a necessary step in the process toward creating needed teacher support systems.
- Sometimes, the needed changes are smaller than we may think. There's a lot to be said for ensuring that teachers have access to such amenities as good coffee and comfortable chairs.
- Working on communication, collaboration, and community will be key for creating a healthy atmosphere at schools.

Conclusion

As with every profession, teachers face various stressors due to the nature of the work they do on a daily basis. However, other professions often have built-in support systems that we simply don't see in the field of education, where teachers are often expected to be superheroes. In addition, we've tended to instill in teachers the idea that the health and happiness of their students and families come far before their own wellbeing. We're now seeing the repercussions of this way of thinking.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the traumatic stressors that came along with it certainly did not help matters, recent circumstances have shed light on the distinct lack of support for teacher wellbeing that has been a problem for a long time. We cannot continue to think that teaching is simply a stressful occupation, and that stress comes with the territory. We also cannot continue to believe that any stress-reduction techniques and strategies need to fall solely to the ever-overwhelmed teachers. Instead, schools and administrators need to address the reasons why teachers are stressed and experiencing burnout. We need to step up our support for overloaded teachers, help them create healthy boundaries between work and life, and create healthy environments at school that enforces a culture dedicated to wellness in the workplace.

Ultimately, this hard work should go a long way toward investing in not only our teachers, but our students as well.

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