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Supporting Teacher Mental Health

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Introduction

Educators experience significant job-related stress. In a 2024 survey of 1,479 teachers nationwide, 59% of respondents reported frequent job-related stress, 60% reported burnout, 22% reported difficulty coping, and 19% reported symptoms of depression (Doan et al., 2024). These rates are much higher than working adults in other industries.

A recent report from Teach Plus shared key findings from a set of focus groups and a survey of Indiana educators (Adjei et al., 2022). The report highlighted three findings related to teacher mental health in Indiana:

- Teachers want increased access to mental health services and better support addressing students' mental health needs.
- Teachers report that increased workload and a lack of time are detrimental to their mental health.
- Teachers desire more transparency from their administrators and more agency in the decision-making process.

For an educator to be effective in the classroom and assist their student's learning and mental health needs, their own needs must be addressed. This brief highlights strategies that school and district leaders can take to support their teachers.

Burnout is temporary and occurs when "individuals have exhausted their personal and organizational resources in fulfilling their professional duties" (Santoro & Price, 2021, p. 2). Burnout is often considered more temporary than demoralization, but rest and recovery are needed to avoid making it more permanent.

Demoralization arises when "teachers feel unable to access the intrinsic rewards of their work, believe they are complicit in wrongdoing, or find that they are incapable of meeting their ethical obligations" (Santoro & Price, 2021, p. 2).

Strategies to Support Teacher Mental Health

Wellness is about systemic and ongoing efforts to support mental health in multiple ways. While teachers may appreciate school-provided massages or a single mindfulness training, "wellness requires ongoing and long-term schoolwide change and should not be treated as a superficial, siloed, or short-term goal" (Santoro & Price, 2021, p. 1). Addressing mental health requires a multifaceted approach, often involving a combination of individual strategies, school-level programs or interventions, and policy changes. Below, we describe research-based and promising strategies for supporting teacher mental health.

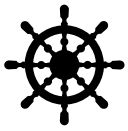
> ***"Wellness requires ongoing and long-term schoolwide change and should not be treated as a superficial, siloed, or short-term goal"*** *(Santoro & Price, 2021, p. 1)*

Review data and get teacher feedback to understand teachers' mental health needs. What do school climate or working conditions survey data suggest about teacher mental health and self-efficacy? What do teachers say they need? Start with reviewing extant data and collecting additional data through surveys or conversations with teachers to understand what they need.

Offer professional learning on and support implementation of trauma-informed approaches to student support. Almost one in four teachers reported "supporting my students' mental health and well-being" as a top-ranked stressor in 2024 (Doan, et al., 2024). Two recent studies found that teachers reported improved self-efficacy and reduced burnout after receiving training on and implementing trauma-informed care for students (Kim et al., 2021; MacLochlainn, 2022).

Offer mindfulness training programs. A recent review of evidence by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2023) found that mindfulness-based training programs have been associated with reduced stress, decreased depressive symptoms, decreased anxiety, and improved overall well-being among teachers and school staff. Administrators can further support implementation by incorporating opportunities to practice mindfulness skills within existing routines (CDC, 2023).

Provide opportunities for relationship building. Teachers may feel less overwhelmed when they feel connected to their students and fellow staff members. Having a strong working culture based on trust, respect, and open communication can help educators work together and solve problems when needed (Santoro & Price, 2021).



Lead with intention. Research has found a relationship between strong school leadership and increased teacher self-efficacy and decreased burnout. In addition, teachers report greater satisfaction when school leaders involve teachers in decision-making, set consistent behavioral expectations for students, and provide constructive feedback to teachers (McLean & Sandilos, 2022). On a recent survey, 66% of teachers reported that additional or better support for student discipline-related issues would support their mental well-being (EdWeek Research Center, 2024).

Protect and respect teachers' time. Only 19% of teachers in a recent survey said that the teaching profession is "sustainable, meaning teachers have schedules that help them focus on teaching, with appropriate workloads and hours." On that same survey, 66% of teachers reported they wish they spent less time completing administrative paperwork (Educators for Excellence, 2024). Giving teachers breaks, offering flexibility, and minimizing administrative paperwork are some ways to support teacher metal health. Part of protecting teachers' mental health is protecting their time in school—and also respecting when they need time outside of school. On a survey from EdWeek Research Center (2024), 57% of teacher respondents identified permitting or encouraging mental health/wellness days as a step their school or district could take to support their well-being.

Partner to increase access to counseling. Accessing counseling can be a challenge for teachers, who usually have inflexible work schedules. Districts and schools can partner with local health providers to creatively provide access to services. In Colorado, all teachers can access a free online self-paced program as well as free individualized support sessions with licensed clinicians or students working on completing their master's degree in counseling, social work, or psychology through Colorado Educator Support, a program through University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus Department of Psychiatry and funded by the Colorado Education Association, the state's Office of Behavioral Health, the Colorado General Assembly, and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. In Spokane, WA, three childcare centers received a grant from the Spokane County Board of County Commissioners to provide mental health services to more than 300 students and 75 early learning childcare providers. Through this program, teachers can access a therapy session during the school day, and the combination of services for teachers and students resulted in a "40% reduction in behavioral related injury and incident reports at one of the childcare centers in the first six months" (Martinez, 2024).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

These questions are intended to help school and district leaders reflect on the mental health of teachers, and the supports available, within their own contexts.

- Thinking about your own contexts, what do school climate or working conditions survey data suggest about teacher stress, burnout, and mental health?
- How can school or district leaders provide meaningful opportunities for relationship building and involve teachers meaningfully in decisions?
- How might you allocate time and resources differently to protect teacher time and improve teacher well-being?
- What opportunities are there to offer teachers training on trauma-informed approaches and mindfulness?
- What mental health support is available to teachers through employee assistance program services or local partnerships? What opportunities exist to improve local partnerships to support teacher mental health?

Additional Resources

Want to learn more? District and school leaders may find these resources helpful.

Providing Teachers More Time and Flexibility Through Innovative Scheduling (Region 8 Comprehensive Center, 2023) – This brief provides an overview of the various types of workplace flexibility and shares three examples of districts in Indiana where leadership is using innovative scheduling to support teacher autonomy, flexibility, and mental health.

Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leaders (CDC, 2023) – Chapter 6 of this guide focuses on research-based approaches to supporting staff well-being and shares implementation tips.

How to Grow Teacher Wellbeing in Your Schools (Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific, n.d.] – This infographic shares why teacher well-being is important, how you can gain insights into teacher well-being, and how you can support teacher well-being.

Structural Supports to Promote Teacher Well-Being (EdResearch for Action, 2021) – This brief summarizes issues impacting teacher well-being, identifies strategies to consider, and cautions against ineffective practices.

Building Trust and Well-Being Through Trauma-Informed Communities: Leader Self-Assessment and Planning Tool (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, 2020) – This tool provides leaders an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which various strategies within five core assessment areas are currently incorporated into their school.

Spotlight on Marian University

At Marian University's Fred S. Klipsch Educators College in Indiana, leaders are prioritizing the mental health of their teacher residents. After receiving feedback from students, reviewing research, and observing classrooms, the faculty identified a need for mental health training for teaching candidates. Additionally, teacher candidates receiving mental health services prior to their residency had difficulty accessing services during their residency, and there was nothing to fill the gap. Starting in 2023, Drs. Karen R. Wright and Francita McMichel embedded two free training programs into their teacher residency program: Mental Health First Aid and National University's Harmony Academy. These programs help prepare their teacher residents to support the mental health needs of their students. At the same time, the program began implementing a tiered approach to candidate support to make sure candidates could access the support they needed to be successful.

Mental Health First Aid is a national program from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. Initially, Marian teacher residents accessed this free program through the Indianapolis-based Sandra Eskenazi Mental Health Center; moving forward, Marian University faculty will provide the training since they have become certified instructors. The training teaches skills to recognize and respond to mental health and substance use challenges, understand risk factors and warning signs, and provide initial support until the person can access professional help. It is typically a 1-day program with options for blended or fully virtual formats. Teacher residents reported that Mental Health First Aid training increased their understanding of mental health challenges, introduced new ideas, and provided a fresh perspective on supporting students. They also learned about additional community resources and how to access them.

In contrast, Harmony Academy's program is self-guided. Teacher residents self-select at least one module per semester. Each module includes a variety of resources, including worksheets designed to prompt thoughtful reflection and inquiry. Module topics include relationship building, diversity and inclusion, community building, and culturally responsive teaching. Teacher residents have reported that

the modules help them be more aware of best practices, how to understand their student's needs, and anticipate what might be a trigger for a student.

During the second semester of the teacher residency, clinical faculty and teacher residents review the data thus far and develop an individualized plan of support. Teacher residents have significant input into the coaching support they receive, when they receive support, and what type of feedback would be most helpful—giving candidates agency in their own program.

"As educators we do a poor job in investing in our own mental health and self-care," notes Dr. Wright, director of residencies and clinical Experiences. "At the Klipsch Educators College, we want to make sure that we equip our aspiring educators with not only the tools to develop and implement a self-care regiment, but also the professional and academic space to use them."

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