Teacher Retention & Wellness

EDITOR’S NOTE
Support and retain teachers with comprehensive strategies and insights. This Spotlight will help you learn how districts can better support teachers; examine the benefits of flexible work arrangements for teachers; uncover how to attract and retain science teachers; evaluate how part-time teaching positions can help keep experienced educators; dive deeper into how school leaders can help prevent or manage teachers’ stress levels; and more.

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Midyear teacher resignations are especially hard on districts. They exacerbate already-difficult staffing shortages, require long-term substitutes or other stopgap measures, and foil principals’ instructional goals for the year.

After nearly three years of battling and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with a drastic increase in students’ mental health needs and pressure to catch students up academically, many teachers have reached a breaking point.

In February 2022, the National Education Association released a nationwide survey of teachers that showed 55 percent of respondents said the pandemic was forcing them to plan on leaving the profession sooner than they had originally planned.

Evidence of a mass, midyear exodus has yet to show up in national labor statistics, which show a fairly steady level of departures from state and local education jobs since November 2021. But anecdotally, some district leaders say they have seen more teachers deciding to leave their jobs this winter than in past years.

Now, some district leaders are turning to long-term investments in tracking and responding to employees’ morale to combat the problem.

**Job satisfaction is subjective and difficult to define**

Nick Polyak, the superintendent of the Leyden High School District in the Chicago area, said it’s atypical to have any teachers resign midyear, but this year several have.

In smaller districts like Polyak’s, every resignation is a major loss, and hiring replacements outside of the summer months is difficult.

And even when a new teacher is hired, the institutional knowledge that left with their predecessor is irreplaceable, Polyak said, so some gaps remain.

“Like anything, organizations have inertia, so when you have the same people there, you keep that momentum going in one direction,” he said. “As soon as you have to pull somebody out, there’s retraining that has to happen and the new person doesn’t have the same institutional knowledge, and it takes time to bring them up to speed … I think you can’t underestimate how important that continuity is.”

Keeping tabs on what staff members want and need to be satisfied in their jobs can be difficult, especially because “happiness” is subjective and varies from person to person, Polyak said.

Some want more money. Others want to be recognized more often for their contributions. And to make matters more difficult, what teachers need can change over time.

To try and keep up and be responsive, Polyak said his district administers climate surveys twice per academic year, one at the beginning and one midway through.

In those surveys, district leaders provide 75 prompts for feedback about employees’ satisfaction with their work, their relationship with their supervisor, and communication within their department. The feedback is anonymous, but can be broken down by department so leaders have a general idea of what different groups of employees need.

**Routine feedback can help districts identify and address problems**

Melissa Sadorf, the superintendent of the Stanfield Elementary School District in Arizona, about an hour south of Phoenix, agreed that routine check-ins with staff can help identify and address problems before they become deal breakers.

The small, single-campus district has 23 teachers. Two midyear teaching resignations, on top of what Sadorf called “significant turnover” among hourly staff like bus drivers and paraprofessionals, have put a strain on the district.

Now, administrators are doubling down on efforts to build connections and trust with their employees.

Leadership for years has underscored the importance of building relationships with employees, and routinely do informal interviews to hear directly from staff about why they choose to stay with the district and what changes they might want to see to get them to stay longer.

All of that information is useless if superintendents don’t take it seriously and use it to make changes, Sadorf said.

“The interviews get actionable feedback, and if we’re doing it early enough in the year, we can potentially head off things that are negative for our environment before they get out of hand or really start weighing on our staff,” Sadorf said. “Especially as our employees are dealing with so much, it can make a difference.”

**Small gestures can go a long way to boost morale**

In Washoe County, Nev., little rubber ducks are working hard to boost staff morale.

Every month, Superintendent Susan En-
field makes about a half dozen pit stops to classrooms, warehouses, and offices across the district to drop off a “duddy award” to an employee nominated by their peers for going above and beyond.

It’s a small gesture—it’s just a rubber duck with the district’s logo stamped on the side—but the public recognition from the district’s top leader resonates, Enfield said. (Enfield is the chair of Education Week’s board of trustees.)

“As human beings, we all have a fundamental need to be seen and appreciated, so the duck is just symbolic that your colleagues appreciate you, your superintendent appreciates you, you matter,” she said. “I don’t think we can ever overestimate how much that means to people.”

The routine has become such a fixture that employees are on the lookout for work they can nominate for a ducky award, perpetuating a cycle of celebrating one another.

**Longstanding policies for barriers to recruitment, retention**

Some fixes take longer than others. Washoe County schools have struggled with staffing shortages for years, Enfield said. At least part of the problem can be traced back to districtwide policies that had been in place so long nobody thought to question them.

Before she was hired and took over as superintendent in July, the district had a policy that mandated a 90-day waiting period before new employees were eligible for health benefits.

Beginning this month, new employees are eligible for benefits when they receive their first paycheck. By the start of the next school year, Enfield wants benefits to begin on the their first day of employment.

The district also only offers teachers one-year contracts, which creates uncertainty and instability for employees that likely drove some away. The district is in the process of changing that practice to offer longer-term contracts, Enfield said.

“Superintendents and leadership teams and school districts need to look at if there are things that are standing practices or policies that are perhaps creating an unintended consequence of not helping you recruit and retain staff,” Enfield said. “I’m new to the district, so I was able to come in and look at that practice and go, ‘Wait,’ whereas, internally, it had just been how things are done.

“So I think that’s a reminder that taking the time to carefully examine and scrutinize what you’ve been doing over time can make a difference,” she concluded.
How might technology increase teacher retention in a teacher shortage crisis? Through student engagement! In a survey of nationwide principals and district leaders, 87% agreed that technology in the classroom improves student engagement. Technology integration can improve teachers’ lives by reducing disruptions, increasing student motivation, facilitating independent work, and improving student retention of information. Technology has the power to simplify teachers’ lives, and to potentially positively impact teacher retention rates. Find out more about the state of technology adoption [here].

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Want to Keep Top Teachers? Consider More Flexible Work Arrangements

By Elizabeth Heubeck

With the start of a new calendar year comes the desire, some might say pressure, to declare a New Year’s resolution. But its very definition, “a promise to do something differently in the new year,” is at odds with the way that school systems typically operate.

It took a global crisis to force immediate, uncomfortable, and immense change in the way schools are run. While remote and hybrid learning during the pandemic were not perfect, they did open educators’ eyes to new ways of teaching. “We realized that there’s far more we can do than we allowed ourselves to do before the pandemic,” said Andi Fourlis, superintendent of Arizona’s Mesa Public Schools.

As ongoing teacher vacancies persist in districts throughout the country, perspectives like Fourlis’—which consider what’s possible first rather than simply reverting to old, pre-pandemic practices—will be paramount for building more flexible strategies to recruit and retain good educators. Education Week spoke with human resources professionals and administrators, who shared how they are trying to think outside the traditional box and make this happen.

Treat employees like professionals

When asked what today’s job candidates in K-12 education are asking for, Brian White offered a response that would’ve been mostly unheard of in pre-pandemic times: “Flexibility around where and when they work,” said White, executive director of human resources and operations for the Auburn-Washburn school district in Topeka, Kan. “That’s what people want.”

That doesn’t necessarily mean teachers and other school employees are requesting totally remote or even hybrid positions, as are many workers in other sectors of the economy. They may be satisfied with subtle but important shifts in how they’re treated, White explained.

“Sometimes, that flexibility comes down to treating people like professionals,” said White. For instance, it could mean giving teachers the option of choosing their work location during designated “professional days”—whether that be at home, a coffee shop, or in their classroom—rather than dictating that they report to the school building.

For some employers, not being able to literally see their employees during the workday can be a difficult adjustment. But if they’ve hired people they trust, treating them like the professionals they expect them to be shouldn’t be a stretch.

Find creative solutions to keep top employees

It’s not uncommon for employers to turn down an employee’s request, such as a more flexible work schedule, simply because it’s never been done before or the existing system isn’t set up to support the change. But if saying “no” means risking the loss of a valued employee, it may be worth trying to find a creative solution.

Melonie Hau, superintendent of Oklahoma’s Duncan Public Schools, explains how a principal in her district did just that.

One of the district’s top special education teachers, who had more than 30 years of experience, had increasing family responsibilities that were going to limit her ability to work the
The school risked losing the teacher’s skills and expertise if it was unwilling to be flexible. “Rather than lose all of that expertise, we asked if she would be interested in mentoring/coaching our first and second year special education teachers,” Hau said.

Before the school’s principal and the teacher reached an agreement for the teacher to work as an independent contractor rather than an employee, the two parties had to negotiate expectations—from hours worked each week to an hourly pay rate and job responsibilities. But Hau said it was worth the additional time and energy required of the principal to find a creative way to allow this very experienced teacher to continue to have an impact in her building.

**Know that expectations will differ for part-time workers**

If a school has only one or two part-time teachers among its faculty members, it can be easy to inadvertently overlook their unique work situation. But doing so can lead to dissatisfaction and possibly an earlier-than-desired end to the unique work arrangement.

Melissa Sadorf, superintendent of Arizona’s Stanfield Elementary School District, elaborates: “We’ve had to be flexible. We know we have this part-time teacher, and we need to make sure we’re being responsive to her needs,” she said. “The expectations need to be different.”

For instance, Sadorf said the school cannot expect the part-time teacher to be at a faculty meeting on a Friday afternoon if she’s not scheduled to work that day.

**Don’t lose sight of the big picture**

When the special education teacher that the Duncan Public Schools transitioned from a full-time employee to an independent contractor first shared her desired hourly pay rate, it was met with resistance. Then, said Hau, the school and district leadership considered the long-term value she could bring as a mentor—especially given the number of inexperienced and/or emergency-certified teachers that the more experienced teacher could potentially be mentoring. If she could help the school build the new teachers’ confidence and subsequently retain them, it could ultimately save the district money.

“If you think about her skill set, she really did deserve it,” Hau said.
How to Keep Science Teachers In the Schools That Need Them Most

By Sarah D. Sparks

Washington, D.C.—As districts nationwide grapple with shortages of math and science teachers, new research suggests enticements to attract teachers to the job may not be as important in the long run as giving them a strong professional community within schools to encourage them to stay.

“We know that retaining science teachers is an important piece; we can’t just say let’s get new teachers in,” said Douglas Larkin, a professor of teaching and learning at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

As part of the annual American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting here last week, researchers discussed emerging data from the Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarships, a two decade-old program developed and run by the National Science Foundation, which provides stipends for college students in science, technology, engineering, and math degree fields in exchange for a commitment to teach for at least two years in schools with high poverty, high teacher turnover, or high percentages of teachers working outside of their certification area.

While teacher shortages are a concern for school leaders across subject areas, they are particularly problematic in STEM fields, said Francisco Rodriguez, the director of the Los Angeles Community College District. In the decade before the pandemic, many districts tried to expand their science course offerings—including more physics, environmental science, and other areas—to widen the pipeline of students headed into STEM career fields, but science teacher shortages have forced many districts to shrink those programs, he said.

“Ninety percent of students in low-income schools don’t have access to physics courses now,” Rodriguez said.

Focused teacher planning needed

University of Houston research scientist Toni Templeton found it isn’t enough for teacher recruiting initiatives to encourage teachers to move toward high-need schools generally; these efforts also need to work with local school and district leaders to identify the highest-need schools and prioritize both teacher-recruitment efforts and retention supports to those schools.

Templeton and her colleagues at the University of Houston Education Research Center looked at how nearly 1,000 Noyce-supported teachers worked out in Texas, a state where more than half of all schools qualified for the program over 20 years.

While all of the first-year teachers who entered teaching through the Noyce program in Texas worked in schools serving a majority of low-income students, only 37 percent of them went to the highest-poverty schools, and those in the highest-need schools were less likely than first-year teachers overall to stay for a second year.

In fact, teachers who entered the highest-need schools through scholarships turned out to be 9 percentage points less likely to stay in their schools than other new teachers, and those who had been fully certified in math or science were half as likely to stay as teachers certified in other content areas.

In part, this could be because science teachers in highly sought content areas could be tempted to go to other schools or other STEM careers, but Templeton said many of the teachers were not leaving education, but were moving into non-instructional roles, such as curriculum designer or teacher mentor.

“We’re taking the best teachers out of the classroom deliberately and putting them into middle management,” she said, arguing that...
School leaders should consider ways to allow effective science teachers to develop professionally while continuing to teach.

**Support for professional goals**

In a separate series of studies of science teacher retention across four states from 2007-18, schools that retained their new teachers were more likely to involve existing science and math teachers in their hiring decisions, and to provide opportunities for content teachers to learn together professionally—not just work together on coordinating lesson plans.

Larkin of Montclair State University and his colleagues looked at science teacher turnover in high-need schools in North Carolina, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, particularly for teachers of color. While teachers who stayed in their initial school did mention practical considerations like salary or their average commuting time, the districts that proved most effective at retaining STEM teachers, particularly teachers of color, were those that focused on ensuring new teachers were a good fit with their schools and felt they had strong professional communities to rely on at school.

“Even if there’s somebody assigned to a new teacher as a kind of mentor, the whole science department is the true mentor,” Larkin said. “Again and again, we saw that people [who stayed in their schools] were able to make connections with other people in content—places where there were large departments, or people had [professional learning community] opportunities to get help with their content by connecting with others.”

The researchers also found that older teachers, who had just started teaching after careers in other STEM fields, were not likelier to stay than other new teachers. They were often given the same supports as any new teacher, but Larkin said mid-career-switching teachers tended to need different supports from new teachers coming directly from college. While they had more content background and experience, they often had less understanding of pedagogical and classroom management approaches.

Larkin’s study, like some prior research, found STEM teachers were more likely to continue teaching if they felt they were continuing to develop in their science fields of study as well as in education.

“Personal career goals matter, particularly for science teachers,” Larkin said. “Teaching is a profession that requires constant professional development, and we can’t expect them to grow without watering them. We expect it of [science teachers] when we would never expect it of doctors.”
David Pearl is the sort of teacher students and colleagues at Maine’s Yarmouth High School don’t easily forget. Colleagues have called the 55-year-old educator “the consummate brain-stormer” and a man with a passion for teaching history and coaching lacrosse. That passion got him invited to participate in the 2021-22 Peace Teachers’ Program, sponsored by the U.S. Institute of Peace, which provides educators with resources to teach about peaceful resolution of international conflicts.

Over time, veteran educators like Pearl—who are skilled and enthusiastic teachers and coaches—can become seemingly indispensable to a school community. The thought of losing them to retirement is, well, unthinkable. That’s why it made sense, when Pearl had a health scare four years ago, for his principal to ask him if he’d like to shift into a part-time teaching role rather than risk losing him entirely to early retirement.

Retaining experienced teachers who might be eyeing retirement by offering them part-time teaching jobs can be a creative piece of an effective teacher retention strategy, according to The Learning Policy Institute, a nonprofit that conducts research to improve education policy and practice.

In an email summarizing the benefits of part-time work, a spokesperson for the nonprofit said such arrangements “can help retain teachers, not only older teachers but younger ones as well (e.g. new parents, those with particular life situations) and allow teachers to create supportive bonds with another teacher with whom they share an appointment or continue as part of a team.”

The problem is that this more creative approach appears to be very rare in K-12 education. Between the 2015-16 and 2017-18 school years, the percentage of public school teachers working part time dropped from 6.7 percent to 6 percent, according to a recent data available about part-time work from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The global pandemic led to increased uncertainty among teachers regarding whether they would teach until retirement. In March 2020, 74 percent of teachers surveyed expected to work as a teacher until retirement, a figure that fell to 69 percent in March of 2021, according to University of Arkansas research. This uncertainty could have provided an opportunity for administrators or teachers nearing retirement to broach the possibility of working part-time. Yet there appears to be no evidence that this is happening on a wide scale.

It’s a disconnect that extends beyond the K-12 education sector. A recent, multinational study of thousands of employees by Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies found that the majority of workers envision a “flexible transition” to retirement. But only about a quarter of workers nearing or at retirement age (55 and older) said their employers offer the opportunity to shift from full-time to part-time work.

This reality exists despite findings that point to the arrangement’s benefits, including the potential for increased employee retention and satisfaction. Carol Graham, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has studied the subject extensively, summarized her research findings on the effects on employees this way: “part-time workers in Europe and the U.S. are more satisfied with their jobs than other employees.”

Such was the case for Pearl after he accepted a part-time position at Yarmouth High School, where he’d been teaching full-time for over two decades. The shift would mean significant changes: carrying a three-course load instead of five, and relinquishing duties as a student advisor, a role Pearl took very seriously. It also resulted in unanticipated benefits.

Escaping the grind of full-time teaching

When reflecting on his decision to step back from his full-time role at Yarmouth High School, Pearl points to the advice his doctor gave him. “My doctor said that, because of the exhaustion and stress [of my job], working part-time would be better for me,” Pearl said. “It definitely has been helpful for my health. I feel very refreshed.”

The transition also has given Pearl the perspective to recognize just how draining teaching full-time is. “I see the bleary-eyed, exhausted look of my colleagues,” he said.

“During the school year, this whole grind
of teaching and preparing; there’s not a lot of room to breathe or find a rhythm to your life that’s sustaining,” Pearl said. “More than a few teachers are just stumbling to the finish line.”

The negative impact of exhausted teachers has to rub off on students, suggests Pearl, who acknowledges that as a part-time teacher he now has more time to do his job thoughtfully—for instance, carefully crafting lesson plans, something full-time teachers don’t often have the luxury to do.

The problems with part-time teaching

While transitioning experienced, older teachers to part-time roles can bring value to employees and employers, it also can pose challenges to both. Employees who are older and have made the transition to part-time work are likely to phase out of employment altogether sooner than their younger colleagues. And, as Hartnett observes: “When it’s time to replace that part-time staff member, it may be harder to do,” especially given that most job seekers are looking for full-time jobs and the benefits and pay that come with them. Plus, reduced pay and benefits can deter full-time teachers from making the switch to part-time employment. “Not everybody can afford to do it,” Pearl conceded. Yarmouth teachers who work part-time receive prorated benefits, Hartnett explains.

Pearl also emphasized that financial benefits aren’t the only ones that decrease when teachers go from full- to part-time employment. “I have fewer connections with students and faculty,” he said. “You miss faculty meetings, contact time with students.”

As a result, Pearl said he’s made a conscious effort to lean into other opportunities in order to make and grow connections with students, such as staying involved in the high school lacrosse team as an assistant coach and routinely spearheading student volunteer activities.

Challenges notwithstanding, Pearl is satisfied with his decision to scale back to part-time teaching after a lengthy career as a full-time teacher. “It’s a great alternative to retiring,” Pearl said. “I love teaching. And I find it a lot easier to come in with energy and optimism. It’s really been fun to do.”

[Older teachers] may be willing to stay on in a part-time capacity, teaching those one or two classes they’re really passionate about.”

PATRICK HARTNETT
High School Principal,
Yarmouth, ME
According to recent data, teacher attrition rates are at an all-time high, with some states reporting teacher turnover as high as 14%, which is up from between 11% and 12% in a typical pre-pandemic year. Factors that contribute to this trend include low salaries, high workload, lack of administrative support, limited career advancement opportunities, and challenging working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated these challenges and led to increased stress and burnout among teachers.

Teachers are leaving the classroom in historic numbers. Here’s how teacher retention can be increased.

Teacher retention can have a significant impact on student achievement. When teachers stay in their positions for an extended period, they have the opportunity to build strong relationships with their students, understand their unique learning needs, and tailor instruction to meet those needs. This can lead to better academic outcomes for students.

Research has shown that teacher turnover can negatively affect student achievement. When teachers leave their positions, students may experience disruptions in their learning, which can lead to lower academic outcomes. Studies have found that schools with high teacher turnover rates tend to have lower student achievement compared to schools with lower turnover rates.

Additionally, experienced and effective teachers can provide valuable support and guidance to new and less experienced teachers. They can act as mentors and help new teachers improve their instructional practices, which can ultimately lead to better outcomes for students.

Teacher retention can also contribute to a positive school culture. When teachers feel supported and valued in their jobs, they are more likely to be satisfied with their work and to provide high-quality instruction to their students. This can create a positive feedback loop, where high-quality teaching leads to better student outcomes, which in turn leads to greater teacher satisfaction and retention.

HOW TO HELP COMBAT THE TEACHER RETENTION CRISIS

1. OFFER COMPETITIVE SALARIES AND BENEFITS
   Low salaries are often cited as one of the most significant factors leading to teacher retention issues. When teachers are paid poorly, they may struggle to make ends meet and feel undervalued, leading them to seek out other job opportunities.
One of the most effective ways to address teacher retention issues is to offer competitive salaries and benefits packages. This can help to attract and retain highly qualified teachers and demonstrate that the profession is valued.

**Provide Supportive Environments**

Teachers who feel unsupported or undervalued by their administrators or colleagues may become disillusioned with their jobs and leave. This can include lack of professional development opportunities, inadequate resources, and insufficient administrative support.

Schools can create supportive work environments by providing teachers with adequate resources, professional development opportunities, and administrative support. This rings true when you're researching any new initiatives – do your diligence on PD, resources, and support that's included because it goes a long way in supporting teachers. Teachers who feel supported are more likely to remain in the profession and thrive in their roles.

**Reduce Workload and Stress**

Teachers often work long hours, have to deal with high-stress situations, and have a lot of responsibility. When the workload becomes too overwhelming, it can lead to burnout and cause teachers to leave the profession.

Schools can reduce the workload and stress of teachers by providing more planning time, hiring additional support staff, and reducing class sizes. When teachers have more time to plan and collaborate with colleagues, they can be more effective in the classroom and less likely to experience burnout.

**Address Student Behavior**

Student behavior can be a significant factor in teacher retention issues. When students are disruptive, disrespectful, or violent, it can make the job incredibly challenging and stressful for teachers.

Schools can address student behavior issues by implementing effective behavior management systems, providing resources for social and emotional learning, and offering support to students who may be struggling. Also consider finding more ways to incorporate exercise and physical movement into the school day - research shows it can help reduce anxiety and stress, improve brain function, and improve behavior for students. By creating a safe and supportive learning environment, teachers are more likely to remain in the profession.

**Provide Opportunities for Autonomy**

Teachers who feel that they have no control over their classroom or curriculum may feel disempowered and frustrated. This lack of autonomy can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and ultimately lead to teacher turnover.

Teachers who have opportunities for autonomy in their classroom and curriculum are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their work. Schools can provide opportunities for teachers to make decisions about their teaching strategies, assessment methods, learning tools, and curriculum development.

**Support Professional Growth and Development**

Professional development opportunities are essential for teachers to continue to grow and improve their skills. When these opportunities are lacking or ineffective, teachers may feel stagnant in their careers, leading to disillusionment and eventually, leaving the profession.

Providing teachers with self-reflection opportunities to identify areas of growth can positively impact their professional trajectory. If teachers can self-identify where they want to grow, or areas they want to learn more about, it can be easy to target which professional development opportunities best fit their needs. Providing professional development
opportunities that are aligned with teacher interest, and that are scaffolded and targeted can increase teacher retention.

**7 Encourage Work-Life Balance**

Teachers often have to work outside of normal working hours, such as grading papers, preparing lesson plans, or attending meetings. When this work takes up too much time, it can interfere with teachers’ personal lives and lead to burnout and dissatisfaction with the profession.

Schools can encourage work-life balance by providing flexible schedules, allowing for telecommuting, and offering personal leave days. When teachers are able to balance their personal and professional lives, they are more likely to remain in the profession.

**8 Recognize and Reward Excellence and Joy**

Schools can recognize and reward teachers who demonstrate excellence in their work. This can include providing opportunities for advancement, offering bonuses, and celebrating accomplishments. When teachers feel appreciated and valued, they are more likely to remain in the profession.

In addition, schools can spread the influence of excellent teachers by creating a culture of joy. A joyful school culture can foster collegiality among teachers. When schools prioritize collaboration, teamwork, and positive relationships, teachers are more likely to feel supported and connected to their colleagues. This can help to create a sense of community and belonging, which can be a powerful motivator for teachers to stay in their jobs. Celebrating teacher and student successes builds a healthy culture that motivates others to do the same.

While measures of “success” are traditionally rooted in testing and achievement outcomes, practitioners know that students progress further if they feel psychologically safe. Staff is no different—by prioritizing and creating a joyful environment, teachers will be more successful and are more likely to remain in their roles. Ensuring the time and space for joy and connection goes a long way in supporting teacher retention and, therefore, student impact.

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**Encourage Work-Life Balance**

**Recognize and Reward Excellence and Joy**

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What School Leaders Can Do to Ease Teacher Stress

By Sarah D. Sparks

Teacher stress and burnout continue to rise in many school districts, worsening teacher absenteeism and turnover and generating national attention. But emerging research suggests principals can do a lot to help teachers cope.

“Stress is a function of how we think about demands in our environment and the resources we have to meet [them], so it’s kind of a psychological balancing act,” said Christopher McCarthy, an education psychology professor at the University of Texas-Austin, one of the researchers discussing teacher stress last week at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association here. “There are very specific demands unique to the teacher’s work environment, and also various resources that they have to meet those demands ... so stress is the teacher’s perception that their demands are exceeding their resources.”

Since 2020, McCarthy, Richard Lambert, an education leadership professor at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, and their colleagues have tracked the links between teacher stress and school climate among nearly 2,000 elementary and secondary teachers in a large, diverse suburban school district. They monitor teachers’ levels of the stress hormone cortisol as well as surveys of teachers’ ratings of their classroom demands and resources, their perceptions of instructional support from administrators, and their job satisfaction. The teachers’ data were mapped to their schools and analyzed in connection to principals’ longevity, experience levels, and leadership styles. Then the researchers looked at the third of schools with the highest classroom demands (and thus the most risk for stress) reported by teachers.

As the study started during the pandemic, teachers across the district reported rising classroom demands. While turnover among both teachers and principals has risen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers found having a new or less experienced principal did not necessarily increase teachers’ stress. Rather, teachers’ stress was linked to their principal’s overall leadership qualities and approach to the job.

To reduce teachers’ stress, McCarthy and Lambert found school leaders can:

- Listen to teachers. Teachers are more likely to report a disconnect between their demands and capacity if they’re not consulted on decisions about school support and resources. (This is particularly important when it comes to teacher wellness initiatives; mandated teacher-relaxation interventions, for example, can backfire if staff don’t want a particular approach.)

- Nurture a climate of self-care. Encourage teachers to set professional boundaries and protect teachers’ break and planning times.

- Take a trauma-informed approach. Mental health problems have risen among children and adults alike since the pandemic began, and educators are often the first to confront the effects of anxiety in the classroom. The Los Angeles Unified schools even launched a professional development course for its principals on how to implement trauma-informed supports for their staff and students.

Instructor Emily Daniels, left, raises her arms while leading a workshop helping teachers find a balance in their work lives while coping with stress and burnout in the classroom, Aug. 2, 2022, in Concord, N.H.

“There are very specific demands unique to the teacher’s work environment[...] stress is the teacher’s perception that their demands are exceeding their resources.”

CHRISTOPHER MCCARTHY
Education psychology professor, University of Texas-Austin
Perhaps one of the most important ways principals can support teachers is by providing time and space for them to support each other. In a separate study, researchers Iksang Yoon and Roger Goddard of Ohio State University studied social-emotional climate and curriculum in 25 Midwestern schools employing more than 1,000 teachers overall. They found that a principal’s instructional leadership—demonstrated, for example, by providing tools and training in social-emotional learning—boosted teachers’ comfort with implementing SEL programs. But how effective principals were at leading that implementation was closely tied to teacher collaboration. The more frequently teachers worked together, the more confident they were with implementing social-emotional programs.

Identify underlying stressors

While burnout is often associated with withdrawal, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence found that across jobs, 1 in 5 workers reported being passionate and interested in their work—and were likely to be highly engaged and often actively learning new skills—but also reported high stress, fatigue, and frustration. And these “engaged/exhausted” staff had the highest turnover rate of any group. A related study by Shengjie Lin, a postdoctoral researcher at the Yale center found about 70 percent of teachers reported feeling competing exhaustion and determination.

“How many of us love our work, but we are freaking tired? Those are the people you have to be careful about, because you don’t notice it,” said Marc Brackett, director of the Yale center.

In follow-up studies of teachers, the Yale center researchers found administrators need to go further than just a staff survey to understand what underlies teacher stress.

“When people say they are tired, ask, is that really exhausted or anxious or frustrated?” Brackett said. “Knowing that will shift the way you support [teachers].”

For example, he said, knowing whether teachers are stressed about health concerns or student behavior makes a difference in whether a leader should focus on COVID protocols or new discipline intervention.

Experts also advised administrators to consider different sources of stress for teachers of color. For example, a Pennsylvania State University study of more than 3,000 teachers found that teachers of color were more likely than white colleagues to report being stressed because they felt inconsistency and a lack of communication from administration.
What's In, What's Out for Student and Educator Wellness

By Alyson Klein & Arianna Prothero

Schools have spent the past few years dealing with a global viral pandemic, what experts have called a “parallel” pandemic for teen mental health, and the teacher and principal burnout that have stemmed in part from the burdens both these crises have placed on educators.

What will 2023—and beyond—have in store? Here’s a look at what’s “in” (hot and relevant) and “out” (becoming less relevant or falling out of favor) when it comes to taking care of the physical and social and emotional needs of students and educators.

1. Supporting teacher mental health

OUT ❌

Superficial self-care: Thinking of telling teachers to take a restorative walk or do some yoga in the same breath that you’re piling on more work? Don’t bother. Many see it as well-intentioned but ineffective at best, and patronizing at worst.

IN ✔

Community care: Teachers want school leaders who are honest about the challenges educators face, and who can help find realistic ways for educators to support one another.

2. Why is everyone sick?

OUT ❌

The COVID pandemic: We know, COVID is still here and will likely stay. And child COVID vaccination rates vary widely by state, from 17 percent in Alabama to 77 percent in the District of Columbia. But COVID-19 isn’t the only major illness around anymore.

IN ✔

The “tripledemic”: COVID isn’t the only virus to worry about. Annual peaks for RSV—respiratory syncytial virus—and the flu hit earlier than anticipated. Part of the problem: Immunity may be down after years of mask-wearing and isolation. “All kids of all ages are getting sick right now with so many circulating viruses. It’s really taking a toll on schools as kids are missing days sick and sharing germs with friends even before they show symptoms,” said Tanya Altmann, a California-based pediatrician and spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. Teachers are also getting sick more frequently, which places an additional burden on the schools, she added.

3. Coping with student trauma related to the pandemic

OUT ❌

Adjusting to in-person learning: When schools returned to in-person learning after months or even an entire year of mostly virtual classes, many students spent the year remembering how to behave around other kids their age, follow school rules, and cope with having less autonomy over their schedule than they may have had at home. This school year, that hasn’t been as much of a concern, educators say. “I think there’s a thirst for structure,” said Ashley Wright, a school counselor at Gordon-Reed Elementary School near Houston in a recent interview. “They just haven’t had it firmly, consistently.”

IN ✔

The long-term impact on students: It’s becoming increasingly clear that the pandemic may have a lasting impact on the mental health of an entire generation of students. Case-in-point: Compared to teenagers coming of age before the pandemic, those who experienced 10 months of lockdowns in 2020 showed three to four years of premature aging in 2020 showed three to four years of premature aging, according to new research. At this point, it’s too early to tell whether the shift is temporary or permanent, but either way, schools should be paying close attention to anxiety, depression, and stress in teens, researchers say.

4. COVID mitigation policies

OUT ❌

Universal mask mandates: In spring 2022, schools started to shed their masking mandates. By October, the school policy tracking website, Burbio, reported that no schools had masking mandates and that it would no longer track the issue.

IN ✔

Targeted masking: But masks aren’t entirely gone. With a surge in RSV and flu infections combined with COVID-19, some districts and schools have recently reinstated temporary masking requirements to help prevent student and staff absences. And in Virginia, parents of immunocompromised children with disabilities won a court case to require that their children’s classmates and teachers be required to wear masks.
5. Social-emotional learning

OUT ✗

SEL jargon: This one is a bit of a bold prediction. A recent Education Week poll found that most educators view social-emotional learning favorably and the biggest barrier to incorporating it into the classroom is time, not parental or community pushback. But over the past two years, social-emotional learning has gotten caught up in larger political battles over education, and a 2021 poll by the Fordham Foundation found that while social-emotional skills are popular with parents, the phrase social-emotional learning is not. So, with the term SEL becoming more politized, while many of the skills that SEL fosters remain popular with parents, educators, and business leaders, maybe SEL is in for a rebranding in 2023? Life skills, anyone?

IN ✔

Social-emotional skills: Eighty-six percent of educators in a recent EdWeek Research Center poll said that their school or district teaches social-emotional learning. Combined with the heightened emotional needs of students coming out of the pandemic, it’s safe to say that teaching skills like managing emotions and setting goals will remain important in 2023. ■
Stop Trying to Recruit Black Teachers Until You Can Retain the Ones You Have
The urgent need to improve Black teacher retention

By Bettina L. Love

Desperately seeking Black educators! Be the role model for the Black children—and not just those in your assigned class. We’ll send you any disciplinary issues we perceive with any Black child in the building, so you’ll get to do the work of a teacher, a mentor, a counselor, and a disciplinarian. We won’t compensate you for this additional labor, but we know you’re excited to make a difference in the lives of these children. Enter this rewarding career today. And don’t forget, you can’t teach Black history.

This is the message school districts send in how they recruit Black teachers. When school officials recruit Black teachers in desperation, while overlooking America’s racism, it is no wonder that they can’t retain them. They inform Black teachers that there are countless Black little faces who need them because oftentimes they may be the only Black teacher at a school, and their presence fills multiple functions as students’ role models, mentors, counselors, and disciplinarians.

Maybe school officials’ strategy for recruiting Black teachers should be to create policies, structures, and initiatives to retain Black teachers, not to recruit them. Yes, I am saying school districts should stop recruiting Black teachers until they have the infrastructure to keep them, protect them, value their labor, affirm their Blackness, and stand up for our culture, history, and communities.

From the onset, the approach that school principals and district recruiters take in recruiting Black teachers is unequal to the labor demands they make when recruiting white teachers. Black teachers are expected to be Black students’ everything, while white teachers are allowed to be teachers. Not to mention the battle fatigue Black educators endure.

For example, a 2021 study found that out of 325 Black math teachers surveyed, 97 percent reported regularly experiencing racial microaggressions in their school community. It is exhausting to come to work and have to fight for your students’ humanity and your own. At the height of the pandemic, research showed that Black teachers were more than twice as likely than teachers overall to report they were planning to leave their job at the end of last school year. This is a rate of turnover that the field can hardly afford: Black teachers already only make up 7 percent of the current teaching population.

Conventional wisdom would tell us that schools should double down on their efforts to recruit Black teachers both as a strategy to diversify the teaching population and also to help minimize teacher shortages. But why do schools keep recruiting teachers they do not know how to retain?

Schools’ inability to retain Black teachers is not only harmful to the profession but also to the students who lose out on the well-researched benefits of learning from a Black teacher. With each Black teacher who enters and then exits the teaching profession, Black children who might have grown up to become educators are learning that teaching is not a welcoming profession for them. We are losing future Black educators in the imaginations of young minds while teaching their non-Black peers that Black people don’t belong at the front of a classroom.

Black teachers have different needs from their peers because of this country’s long history of anti-Blackness. To ignore those needs is to choose to perpetuate a harmful and racist education system for Black teachers and students.

For school and district leaders ready to get serious about retaining Black teachers, one good place to start is with the recommendations by the Center for Black Educator Development and Teach Plus for supporting Black teachers. These recommendations include assigning mentors, convening affinity groups to facilitate their personal growth and identity development, and implementing culturally responsive curricula.

Learning how to retain Black teachers
needs to be a focus for the entire school. Retention needs to be a recruitment tool. When a Black teacher shows up for an interview, a principal should be proud to tell them about all the work the school is doing to build a culture that respects and empowers Black teachers to be leaders in their school and community.

A principal should be able to describe how the mental health of all teachers, and especially Black teachers, is a priority at the school. Other Black teachers should be able to speak with a prospective Black teacher about all the ways they are supported by school leaders and other teachers.

Learning how to retain Black teachers means that a school is learning how to care for, love, and support Black people, a shift in the culture that will also help all the Black children in the school in the process.

OPINION

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Wellness Can't Be Just Another Task for Teachers to Do
Six ways the education community can step up

By Beth Pandolpho

As we settle into the third school year that has been impacted by the pandemic, my social-media feed has been dominated by books, articles, webinars, and smartphone apps offering the promise of “educator wellness.” I’m all for educators being well, but I do have a problem with this pursuit of wellness being placed squarely on the shoulders of already overburdened educators.

As an instructional coach for grades 6-12, I witness the strain my colleagues are under every day and I am endlessly frustrated that it’s beyond my control to provide them with the support and relief they deserve. Teachers should not be tasked with the additional job of pursuing their own wellness, just so they can trudge through yet another week of school in their N95 masks surrounded by students, hoping they don’t bring COVID-19 home to their families.

Plus, teachers are still recovering from the frustrations of the past school year when they had to try to motivate, engage, support, teach, and assess students virtually. Not only did the technology entail what for many was a new set of skills to master, but teachers also often found themselves facing a screen full of black boxes. Had students simply turned their devices’ cameras off, or were they not there at all? Teachers wanted so badly to do a good job, and although they were working long hours, there were few signs of success.

This year, teachers want their students back at school, and kids absolutely need to be back at school. But that just brings new challenges. At the most basic level, how do teachers quickly learn students’ names at a social distance when everyone’s faces are mostly covered by masks? How do teachers master unfamiliar names when they can’t see a student’s mouth move nor can they stand closer to hear them more clearly? How do teachers forge meaningful connections with students when our school systems have not created space for healing from the personal traumas suffered over the past year and a half?

In spite of these obstacles, school is marching on, pretending to be business as usual when all of us on the inside know that nothing is as usual. Standardized tests are back this fall with a vengeance, measuring “learning loss”—an arbitrary and deficit-oriented term—and prompting already weary teachers to frantically run on the hamster wheel to “catch students up.” Policies that emphasize compliance and control at the state and district levels are firmly in place, and school schedules remain as rigid and unforgiving as ever.

Professors Justin Reich and Jal Mehta remind us that what our students and teachers need most is “healing, community and humanity.” Addressing those matters, they write, “is not peripheral to the academic mission of school, it is a vital part of such a mission.”

Fortunately, teachers have long known that supporting students’ social and emotional well-being is foundational to learning, and they are doing the best they can for their students despite an inflexible system. But again, who is taking care of the teachers’ social and emotional well-being? Apparently, to self-proclaimed wellness experts, teachers are supposed to be doing that as well. And we wonder why teacher burnout has been a long-standing issue.

Lora Bartlett, an associate professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who studies the teaching profession, reminds us that even before the pandemic, more than 40 percent of teachers left the profession by their fifth year, and 8 percent left the profession annually, according to federal longitudinal data. “The most common reason teachers give for voluntarily leaving the profession is dissatisfaction with school or working conditions.”

LORA BARTLETT
Associate professor, University of California, Santa Cruz

The most common reason teachers give for voluntarily leaving the profession is dissatisfaction with school or working conditions.”
school districts, and parent groups must step up. The way to support the people who are taking care of our children is for others in the education community to pool their resources and consider doing some of the following:

1. Schedule all after-school meetings virtually or even asynchronously if possible. After a full day of teaching in a mask, teachers deserve to breathe easier and perhaps even attend meetings from home.

2. Offer stipends when asking teachers to offer their time for additional duties during the school day and beyond. (A shortage of substitute teachers has prohibited release-time during the school day and thus increased after-school meetings for teachers.)

3. Create and prioritize time in the school day for teachers to plan together. Collaboration eases the planning burden on teachers, and collective efficacy impacts student learning.

4. Ask for and act upon feedback from teachers regarding school schedules and building protocols; no one knows better than teachers what will most benefit them and their students.

5. Extend extra sick days to teachers for the purposes of mental health and family issues for their continued service under extraordinary circumstances.

6. Provide wellness opportunities for teachers to choose from such as free mindfulness apps, health-club memberships, and yoga classes as additional support.

The teaching profession can’t afford to lose the expertise of senior teachers who mentor our newer teachers, nor can it afford to lose newer teachers who can in turn bring fresh ideas to seasoned teachers. There is so much that we can’t change about the pandemic, but what we can do is offer our teachers autonomy, respect, flexibility, and gratitude as these are not finite resources; we just need to get our priorities straight to be willing to provide them.

Beth Pandolpho is an instructional coach in central New Jersey and a former high school English teacher. Her book I’m Listening: How Teacher-Student Relationships Improve Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening was published by Solution Tree in 2020. You can follow her on Twitter @bethpando and learn more about her work at www.bethpandolpho.com.