PAYING ATTENTION TO YOUR TEACHERS’ CONCERNS ABOUT TIME, RESPECT, AND SUPPORT IS A POWERFUL WAY TO SUPPORT YOUR FACULTY.

By Jan Richards

HEARING THAT TEACHERS are feeling increasingly stressed is nothing new. Teachers and schools are experiencing severe cutbacks in resources, overloaded classrooms, and often pay cuts because of the economic downturn. School budgets have been cut to the bone and teachers are being laid off. Student performance expectations have remained steady, but the needed pool of resources has diminished.

When your teachers come to school lacking that sparkle and enthusiasm that contributes to a positive school climate, you need to be concerned. After all, it is a teacher’s passion to make a difference in the lives of students that generates student excitement and engagement. Hopeful, happy teachers who feel appreciated and who put their energy into effecting positive change create a sense of community that will increase your own job satisfaction.

My concern for how teachers nationwide are coping with unrelenting levels of stress is the topic of current research (Richards, in press). A national sample of 1,200 teachers was asked to complete a survey addressing three areas: the sources of teacher stress; the manifestations of stress; and coping strategies they found most successful. Knowing the areas that cause teachers to feel stressed is useful information for principals who want to energize and encourage their teachers.

The health of our schools is one of the measures we as a nation use to evaluate how well we are preparing the next generation for 21st century challenges. Teachers are critical players in this scenario because their influence touches all children through 12 to 13 years of schooling. Thus, concern for teachers’ level of job satisfaction and stress is important to the successful academic preparation of our youths.

Currently, research professor Teresa McIntyre from the University of Houston is beginning a three-year study that links teacher job stress to student achievement. “Teacher stress affects various aspects of teacher health and may influence how effective teachers are in the classroom, with potential consequences for their students’ behavior and learning,” McIntyre said (PR Newswire, 2011). Results of such studies will be helpful to concerned administrators and principals as well as to teachers themselves.

Sources of Stress
According to the teachers surveyed, the top five reported sources of school-related stress are:

- Feeling overcommitted at work with too many duties and responsibilities;
- Teaching needy students without enough support;
Little time to relax; 
Teaching students who do not seem motivated to learn; and 
Feeling the constant pressure of being held accountable.

Here is an example of what one exhausted teacher shared: “My body is giving out before my mind. I have no life other than teaching. Every night, every weekend I’m grading, planning, communicating with parents. I’m never caught up. I miss having a life.”

Manifestations of Stress 
The top five ways teacher stress is manifested is not surprising. They are:

- Physical exhaustion;
- Loss of idealism and enthusiasm about teaching;
- Feeling overwhelmed and having doubts about their abilities;
- Medical issues such as frequent headaches, stomach pains, and high blood pressure; and
- Negative effects on personal relationships.

One teacher in the study shared: “I am currently suffering from generalized anxiety disorder. I am in the process of figuring out what meds are best for me. I am more aware now than ever just how stressful my job is.”

Six Secrets of Successful Principals

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<th>Secret</th>
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<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>Take recess duty on a scheduled basis.</td>
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<td>two</td>
<td>Go into classrooms so teachers can go visit other classrooms or work with team members on a project.</td>
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<td>three</td>
<td>Give out teacher awards on a regular basis during student awards assemblies.</td>
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<td>four</td>
<td>Provide an exercise/aerobics class after school led by the physical education teacher.</td>
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<td>five</td>
<td>Before back to school night and open house days, visit classrooms and write a positive note on how nice their rooms look.</td>
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<td>six</td>
<td>Maintain an open door policy and visit classrooms, which helps teachers feel valued and supported.</td>
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Coping Strategies

Discovering coping strategies that work are critically important. Some of the surveyed teachers are coping with the effects of stress in positive ways such as making time for hobbies, friends, or massage; they also mentioned the benefits of exercise and getting adequate sleep. Also mentioned repeatedly was the value of a sense of humor as well as having a positive attitude. These teachers realize that they have little power to affect challenges such as poverty, the number of students in their classes, or the availability of needed materials.

While some surveyed teachers have figured out coping strategies, others indicated that they are very close to burnout. “It just isn’t fun anymore,” responded one teacher. “I am thinking about leaving after this, my 11th year of teaching, because I am expected to work miracles and I give up ... I don’t have strategies to cope. Most times I am just depressed, tired, and irritable."

That many teachers seem to have lost their enthusiasm, idealism, and sense of efficacy is troubling—but our distressed teachers do not suffer in isolation. Their attitudes spill over into the heart and soul of the school campus, into its emotional atmosphere and sense of community. Your own happiness and efficacy as a principal cannot help but be affected by the level of job satisfaction your teachers experience. I wondered what role a principal might play in lowering levels of teacher stress, and thus I asked these practicing teachers a follow-up question: What can your principal do to make you feel less stressed? Their answers are enlightening and focus on three areas of concern: time, respect, and support.

What Principals Can Do

Allot Time. The need for time was the response most given in connection to what a principal can do to lower teacher stress levels. Teachers mentioned the need for more time to plan, organize, create, and reflect. “I believe it is crucial that principals buffer teachers from distractions/ issues that prevent them from doing the main task of teaching,” said one teacher.

Respondents pointed out the importance of honoring their break time as well as the critical need to reduce the length and number of meetings to what is essential. Some described principals who honored their teachers’ time. For example: “My principal schedules an extra 15 minutes with our normal 30-minute PE time on Mondays and Fridays to use for data grade-level meetings and other team-centered meetings instead of having them after school. This is very helpful.” Another teacher praised her sensitive principal for providing breakfast or lunch for the staff during the hectic grading period.
Teachers feel supported by a principal whose door is always open, and who is available, visible, and interactive.

Responding teachers offered the following specific suggestions for principals who want to demonstrate that they value teachers’ time:

- Avoid scheduling staff meetings during a week that teachers are preparing for conferences;
- Schedule as few meetings as possible during the first quarter;
- Ensure that a particular week is not burdened with meetings, holidays, observations, and planning;
- Protect teachers from interruptions;
- Honor their break time; and
- Use email (or your school website) for passing out information.

**Show Respect.** Teachers indicated that your respectful words and actions help to manage stress. This show of respect is evident when teachers are included in decision-making. For example, teachers would like to help figure out the schedule, especially for special occasions.

Respondents also commented on the need for informal, open discussions that include the majority of the staff on what is good for the students, the teachers, and the school. One teacher noted: “We know what works and what doesn’t, but no one ever consults us. In the end, the teachers and the students are the ones who suffer. Involve us—we know what we’re doing.”

Teachers mentioned the need for a principal to be visible and to spend time in classrooms in order to see what teachers are accomplishing. They emphasized the importance of knowing each teacher’s personality type and of using that information when forming committees and grade-level teams and selecting leadership roles.

Teachers also noted the need to be seen and treated as professionals. “[We] should be treated with respect in front of colleagues, parents, and especially students,” one teacher explained. “One of the worst principals I had would call teachers out over the intercom and the students knew their teacher was in trouble. This was a clear signal to them that if the principal didn’t respect the teacher then the students didn’t have to either.”

**Offer Support.** Teachers had plenty to say about the importance of feeling cared for, praised, and encouraged. Knowing they have worked hard to engage all students, your teachers become disheartened when negative news reports paint their job performance as lacking.

One teacher suggested: “With all the negative press about the poor job teachers are doing and the many changes that need to be made, I think the administration ... should take every opportunity to praise us for the excellent work we do every day and let us know that our efforts are appreciated. We are expected to praise children for a job well done, and adults need that as well.”

This praise and support comes in a variety of forms: encouraging words on a teacher’s observation performance, giving kudos when your staff comes up with great ideas, or backing a teacher with a difficult student or parent. One surveyed teacher described an amazing show of support and care: “Our principal had an in-service day for teachers that was not on education but strictly on stress relief and self-care. We had a yoga session, short novel session, massage and facials (lunch on her) and were allowed to leave a bit early that afternoon. It was wonderful.”

Teachers feel supported by a principal whose door is always open, and who is available, visible, and interactive with teachers and students. They need to know you have their back. They want you to show them respect (especially in front of students) and, when there is a problem, they appreciate that the matter be discussed in private.

Simply acknowledging the reality of pressure and stress and reassuring teachers that they are appreciated is helpful. One principal made it a habit of coming into the classroom just to lend a hand, asking “How can I help you in the next 15 minutes?” The students saw the principal as involved and someone important who cared about their academic progress. “With my principal, I feel like we are working on the same team,” said one teacher. “He is approachable, relational, and I consider him a friend.”

Like the maestro of an orchestra who works to create blended sounds of beauty and harmony, a principal is in a position of creating a positive and productive school community where all players feel valued. Paying attention to your teachers’ concerns about time, respect, and support is a powerful way to attain that goal.

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**References**
