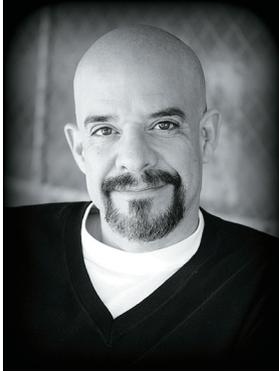


Teacher Wellness:

A Conversation With Adam Sáenz

Principals play a key role in this crucial—but overlooked—aspect of staff development.



Kids can't do their best in school if they are stressed—or, for that matter, if they're tired, hungry, or shaken by a situation at home. Turns out, the same is true of teachers, according to psychologist Adam Sáenz.

"In occupations like teaching, or any kind of public service or mental health field, self-care is just too neglected," says Sáenz, author of *The Power of a Teacher*, a handbook for educators on practicing wellness. The book, a guide to help teachers maintain physical, emotional, financial, and occupational well-being, sprang from his work as a school psychologist.

"I know that when I work with kids in my private practice, working with their parents, the adults in the home, is a critical piece of that," he says. "My heart was to create an intervention for kids, but really, it was more directed to teachers."

His other reason for penning *The Power of a Teacher* was more personal. Teachers were instrumental in Sáenz's journey from a troubled childhood to success in college and beyond, what he calls "from handcuffs to Harvard." He says helping teachers balance their lives allows them

to be their best selves in the classroom, and build key relationships with students who are struggling—like he was.

"If we can keep teachers healthy, then every student benefits from that," he says. "The most effective intervention for every student is a healthy teacher living a balanced life."

Here, Sáenz shares his tips on how to broaden your staff development to include wellness.

Principal: Why is it important for schools to promote overall wellness?

Adam Sáenz: In most of the schools I've been to, there's no program in place for well-being at all. For the schools that *have* started talking about the term, it's mostly about physical well-being. It's a great start, but it's such a small piece. As a psychologist, I know that all the areas of wellness are connected and they

affect each other. Even if I'm taking care of my body, if my emotional well-being is poor, it's going to tear my body apart anyway.

What's a principal's first step to helping teachers cultivate well-being?

The first step is that a principal needs to buy into the return on investment that they will get by encouraging teachers to maintain balance and well-being. Then, you market that idea at a campus level. Have a PR campaign. You might post flyers in a common area, place letters in mailboxes, maybe have some pins made or bracelets made to advertise the idea. Something like, "Smith Elementary: We're achieving well-being." Establish a launch date for it, maybe at the beginning of the semester or the year. Then, it's just a matter of training and equipping staff. That can be done through staff development that describes what it looks like to achieve well-being.

I would frame it [to staff] like this: This isn't well-being just for the sake of well-being. Yes, it's important. You'll benefit from it, and the kids will benefit from it. But let's engage this idea as a community-building endeavor.

What kind of school culture is conducive to promoting wellness?

That kind of culture can be characterized as a community that is wedded to a vision. That language sounds cliché or esoteric, but I would encourage a principal to ask three questions: First, is my school experiencing community? Second, have we identified and clarified our vision? And third, are we all sold on that vision? If an administrator can answer "yes" to those three

questions, then anything is possible at that point.

How can a principal help his or her school staff practice well-being?

From a principal's perspective, the golden nugget on the selling of this idea is what you model to staff. Are you modeling emotional well-being by experiencing a wide range of emotions? Are you appropriately expressing those emotions in ways that are healthy? Are you modeling occupational well-being by engaging in, say, a community with colleagues—or do teachers perceive you as an unsafe or threatening person?

It's a macrocosm of what we see in the classroom, where the teacher models those actions for the students. The same dynamic is true at a campus level, with the administrator modeling that behavior for the teachers.

By focusing energy on teachers' wellness, it might be easy for a principal to overlook his or her own well-being. What can a principal do to counter that?

That's part of the downside to leadership—it can be lonely at the top. What you *can* do is find time—and it may be outside the workday—to connect with other administrators who are doing what you are doing. It may boil down to, say, taking ten minutes in the evening for you to check in with these people on Facebook or to give them a call over the weekend. The question as a principal is: How can I forge a resourceful relationship with other administrators?

Then, another piece relates to emotional well-being. Ask yourself which emotions are problematic for you at

work. Specifically, stress and anxiety? How am I using those emotions instead as a fuel source to create a positive change in my work situation? 

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/JanFeb13

Discover Adam Sáenz's **strategies for tackling four common wellness quandaries**, including how to engage discouraged new teachers and how to support teachers' well-being even on a crunched schedule.

Information about Sáenz's **workshops for schools** can be accessed on his website.

You can find Sáenz's book *The Power of a Teacher* in the **National Principal's Resource Center Bookstore**.

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