

# communicator

The Monthly Newsletter of the National Association of Elementary School Principals

## in side

2 President's  
Perspective

3 Members in the  
Spotlight

5 NAESP's  
student essay  
contest

6 Bookmark It:  
Effectively use data

### Special Insert:

Proposed changes to  
NAESP's resolutions

## Beating the Economic Blues

It's official—we're now in the midst of a recession. And whether it's a faculty member stressing about a spouse's layoff, a student's concerns over his family facing foreclosure, or your own anxiety about your retirement account whittling away, there are likely several people in your building feeling the affect of the declining economy.

However, a principal's response during these tough times can make an enormous impact on everyone in the school, calming anxiety and ensuring that work isn't affected.

### Helping Teachers

You may not know for sure which of your teachers is experiencing economic difficulties, but there are several ways principals can reach out to their faculties as a whole to help deal with stress. One of the easier methods is to make available tips on coping with stress, either through a staff newsletter, fliers posted in the break room, or a "stress buster" tip of the day sent via e-mail, suggests Jana Martin, a clinical psychologist and spokesperson for the American Psychological Association.

Martin, who has more than 20 years of experience working in schools, says one of the most important things principals should keep in mind is that routine and predictability are essential to handling stress. "When people are feeling that things are outside of their control, they can panic or be overwhelmed unless they are reminded of things which



Stress can take over a school during times of economic uncertainty, but principals can help maintain a positive school culture by helping faculty and students to deal with their anxiety. ©Alan Crosthwaite

are under their control. Knowing that the routine at work will continue, for example, is helpful," she says. "Avoid too much change at once. If staffing assignments have to change, try to minimize how many

occur at one time. Now would not be the time to rearrange the office and undergo major renovating projects, which cause significant disruption."

If you do not have a psychologist on staff at your school, contact one in your community and ask him or her to provide a presentation on such topics as stress management and mind/body health. According to Martin, every state has a public education campaign coordinator, trained by the American Psychologi-

continued on page 7

## Economic Blues

continued from page 1

cal Association, who will present free workshops on stress and other topics. Simply contact your state's psychological association (view a list at [www.apa.org/practice/refer.html](http://www.apa.org/practice/refer.html)) to be put in touch with the coordinator. Also, a visit from a nutritionist can assist by talking about the importance of healthy eating during times of stress.

Martin says that there are clues that indicate a staff member may be trying to deal with issues at home. For example, principals should make note of changes in habits of their teachers, such as working, eating, or talking more or less; or staying late and leaving early. "If these changes are sustained, they may be signaling that the staff member is overwhelmed and is trying to cope by trying to gain more control over all things, or is not coping well and is losing control."

Although a teacher may all of a sudden adopt what may seem like positive habits, such as working longer hours, this could be a red flag, Martin warns. "Principals may be pleased to see that staff members are working harder and longer, and while this may initially be a good coping strategy, it may in the long run mean that the staff member is creating more stress and pressure on him/herself and may be ignoring essential self-care and headed towards burn out."

### Boosting Morale

RHR International, an organization that serves the psychological needs of people in organizations, offers the following suggestions on maintaining morale among your staff:

- Communicate—early and often.
- Build trust by sharing experiences. Don't be afraid to listen to the personal stories of your employees, and don't be afraid to share your own concerns.
- Maintain your sense of humor. A little humor, even if it's about

serious topics, goes a long way to alleviate stress.

- Make it personal. Let your employees know that you appreciate them.

Martin also suggests that principals be more visible, point out individuals' successes, and be patient. "Understand that tempers may flair or work may suffer," Martin explains. "Don't excuse it, but be empathic when pointing out what needs to be changed. Be supportive."

### Reaching Out to Students

While your teachers may have a pretty good idea about what the recession may bring, such world events can be unsettling for children, especially those who are too young to fully understand what specifically is going on. And if there is plenty of talk around their dinner table about economic strife in their household, it may cause students to be scared, confused, and nervous about what the future may hold. The National Association of School Psychologists suggests schools take a role in helping reassure students.

For example, principals and teachers should assess student needs by taking cues from what your students do and say. If at all possible, find out which students' families may be impacted by the economy in order to focus assistance on those individuals.

Class discussion about the topic may be helpful to students if you notice they are growing concerned. The National Association of School Psychologists says teachers should be prepared to answer questions factually or to guide discussion about difficult issues. The assistance of the school psychologist or counselor can be sought in such situations.

### Addressing Your Needs

Of course it's important to help your teachers and students, but it's just as crucial for you as the principal to address your own needs. It's the leader's ability to set the tone and an example for his or her

faculty, staff, and students that will bode well for maintaining a positive school culture.

The American Psychological Association offers these ways to lessen the everyday impact of stress:

- Make the most of workday breaks. Even 10 minutes of personal time can refresh your mental outlook. Take a brief walk, sit quietly with your eyes closed, or talk to a co-worker about a non-job topic.
- Limit your exposure to the negative stories in newspapers and on television to minimize your anxiety and prevent bad decision-making.
- Identify your own financial stressors and make a plan. Review your financial situation and identify what causes you stress. Write down specific ways you and your family can reduce expenses or manage your finances more efficiently. Then commit to a specific plan and review it regularly.
- Recognize how you deal with stress related to money. In tough economic times, some people are more likely to relieve stress by turning to unhealthy activities like smoking, drinking, gambling, or emotional eating. Be alert to these behaviors—if they are causing you trouble, consider seeking help from a psychologist or community mental health clinic before the problem gets worse.

It's during times like these that it is especially important for principals to lead the way in helping ensure that stress caused by factors outside the school building don't take a toll on staff and students while inside the school building. From what news reports indicate, it's still a long road ahead before the economy turns around, but the resiliency of principals is sure to shine as they lead their schools toward continued success despite current economic events.

—Vanessa St. Gerard