

Education Without **EXHAUSTION**



Educators should recognize the warning signs of burnout and head it off before it can affect school performance

By Dan Butler



Educators are under constant pressure to meet the needs of a variety of learners, engage families, and collaborate with colleagues, while doing everything necessary to make a difference in the lives of students. These, among myriad other responsibilities, are part of the typical routine in the life of an instructor.

Add curricula, federal and state initiatives, and community responsibilities to teachers' plates, alongside conflict resolution, at-risk and dropout prevention, financial literacy, trauma-informed care, STEAM, and early literacy initiatives to that list. With so much demanded of educators and not one extra minute added to the day, teachers and staff are at high risk for burnout.

Experts Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter define "burnout" as a psychological syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness that can occur among individuals in any field, and especially the service professions. It is a syndrome that emerges gradually over time.

What Causes Burnout?

Having too much to do and insufficient time or resources to do it is a legitimate issue. In addition to the many demands and responsibilities placed upon educators, 24/7 accessibility and the hyper-connected environment in which educators work today presents another set of work overload issues.

With access to email, grade books, lesson plans, text messages, social media, and instructional resources at the click of a mouse or touch screen, it is more difficult to disconnect from work responsibilities. The boundary lines between work and life have blurred with the advancement of technology, and if educators are not intentional about separating the two, the work never seems to end.

When educators feel micromanaged, think they don't have a voice in what they do, and lack autonomy, they are more likely to experience burnout. Accountability measures, teacher evaluation tied to student performance, standardization of instruction, reduced funding, and curricular pacing guides are some of the recent trends that threaten teacher autonomy.

Insufficient rewards or lack of positive feedback can increase stress in the workplace and ultimately contribute to burnout. Teachers may feel they are compensated inadequately for the work they do, or that their efforts go unrecognized. When educators' work isn't acknowledged, the message sent is that it isn't important. People want to be seen and to know that what they think, say, and do matters.

Teachers are susceptible to burnout when they lose a sense of positive connection with others in the school or district. Insensitive co-workers and colleagues may be stressors due to discourtesy or even bullying. This occurs often in schools, unfortunately, and such behaviors are a recipe for disengagement, toxicity, and ineffectiveness. Conversely, co-workers and colleagues can also be critical resources in providing help, trust, and friendship. In the midst of the challenges and stress at school, nothing is more crucial to success than investing in each other socially while enriching a collaborative and supportive culture.

Why Should We Care?

Burnout is threatening the well-being of society, having a financial impact on our country, and influencing the optimal growth of students and the quality of our educational system. Teacher attrition due to work stress is increasing, with 40 to 50 percent of new teachers leaving the profession after only three years of service. Workplace burnout continues to be one of the most common reasons teachers leave the profession behind each year.

When top-quality educators are burned out, absentee rates go up, meaning more substitute teachers, less consistency, and reduced levels of student learning. Burnout is reaching epidemic proportions among American workers; job stress costs the U.S. economy \$300 billion in sick leave, long-term disability, and excessive job turnover.

There are a number of negative physical consequences of burnout as well, including sleep disturbances, physical tension, anxiety, gastrointestinal disorders, depression, and poor nutrition. Disengaged, unhealthy, and unhappy teachers are not as productive, innovative, energetic, or effective, leading to negative student outcomes. More importantly, teachers who experience burnout lose the joy and fulfillment of making a difference in the lives of students.

Recognizing the Signs

Now that you know a little more about burnout, here are four indicators to consider when working with your staff.

1. **Absentee Rates.** Are your employees missing work more than usual, or taking additional days off due to sickness?
2. **Withdrawal From Groups.** Do you notice that staff members are withdrawing from



their teams? Are they disengaged during collaborative conversations and meetings? Have they removed themselves from social opportunities outside school, or do they appear to be simply going through the motions? When educators begin to consistently withdraw, there is a good chance they are experiencing feelings of burnout.

3. **Cynicism.** If you have staff members regularly expressing negativity, there is a chance they are burning out. Educators who feel cynical create distance between themselves and their students. This can be explained by seeing students as numbers in a book or products on an assembly line, rather than unique individuals with beating hearts, exhilaration, and unlimited potential.
4. **Lack of Effectiveness and Confidence.** Teachers who experience ineffectiveness feel a growing sense of inadequacy while losing confidence in their ability to make a difference.

Principals must keep a close eye on their staff members to look for these early indicators of burnout. Here are three strategies teachers and principals can use to overcome burnout:



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Check out Dan Butler's blog at danpbutler.com and the book *Banishing Burnout: Six Strategies for Improving Your Relationship With Work* by Michael Leiter and Christina Maslach.



- **Individual Conversations.** In the past school year, I invested a significant amount of time conducting individual conversations with all staff members in my school. I have 50 members on my team and set out to do this on a monthly basis.

After one month, I realized that an individual monthly conversation with each member of our team was too aggressive, so I adjusted this to a quarterly individual conversation.

Thirty-minute talks centered around five questions, including “Tell me about a ‘win’ or something that has gone really well in the past few weeks”; “What do you love about your job at Epworth Elementary?”; “If you could change one thing at Epworth Elementary, what would it be?”; and “What is your unfair advantage (or definite strength) that allows you to succeed on a daily basis?”

These conversations allowed me to get to know our staff members on a deeper level while listening to their motivations, values, and concerns. Purpose was established and clarified, while staff members were given a voice and felt valued. We did not solve every issue for every staff member, but time and space were created

to listen and validate, which increased levels of commitment and engagement.

- **Recognition Notes.** I start each day by writing two notes of recognition and appreciation to staff members; my friend and fellow educator, Jeff Zoul, introduced this practice to me. I might write a note to the custodian for an exceptional job of setting up the gymnasium for an event, or to a teacher for winning an award. I don’t have any criteria for these notes of recognition, other than to let people know that I can see that what they are doing is making a difference for our school. This allows me to scan the environment for great things every day and spread positivity to teachers and staff.
- **Practice Self-Care.** Educators continually search for balance in an attempt to give equal amounts of energy to school and family. I don’t know whether this is an attainable goal, but I do have a few suggestions that have worked for myself and members of my staff. Take care of yourself by eating healthy, exercising at least three times per week, getting adequate rest, and powering down your electronic devices.

Exercise gets blood to your brain and stimulates the proteins that keep neurons connecting. It is beneficial in combatting anxiety and depression. I no longer have email access on my phone, and I have encouraged the teaching staff to remove it. This allows me to resist the urge to check email when I am away from school.

I have also established a communication protocol with staff members: If a response is needed within 24 hours, they are instructed to send an email. If a response is needed within an hour, staffers can send a text message. If I am needed immediately, team members must call my cell phone. This protocol helps me be more present in the moment, even away from school.

Educators across the country are being asked to do more with less, significantly threatening engagement among school staff members. If leaders aren’t conscious of workload, autonomy, and recognition and appreciation, we run the risk of staff burnout. The outcomes of burnout are real and negative. But its warning signs are well-documented, making it the responsibility of educational leaders to contribute to systems of social support, connection, and engagement. □

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