



## Feeling the Burn

Create a culture of wellness to support teachers who seem to be losing their spark

BY STEPHANIE KNIGHT-HAY WITH MARJANEH GILPATRICK

**T**eachers go into the profession to effect change. To make a difference. To help students. Most new public educators never guess how human the job really is, though, and 50 percent will leave their positions within five years. What makes the fire fizzle out so fast?

Few professions cause one to feel so deeply. Teachers give so much of themselves. In his classic book, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer says that one must have the courage to keep his or her heart open, but it's challenging to do so. And the times are constantly supplying new challenges, such as the school shutdowns produced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Everyone had to become technologically savvy in a short period of time at the outset, causing more stress for everyone involved—particularly the teachers. They are on the front lines, so connecting with students, ensuring they are meeting and/or exceeding academic standards, addressing families' concerns and questions, and at the same time maintaining their own family and home lives became even more difficult.

### A Culture of Support

In times like these, building a trusting and supportive school culture is critical. Just as teachers learn about their students' lives, site leaders must take time to know their teachers and make connections. When these connections are strong, administrators can rely on them to create and maintain a community of support. In such an environment, teachers are less likely to feel burned out when a crisis occurs.

To help teachers avoid burnout, administrators might model and demonstrate how to maintain a balance between work and home life. Are we sending emails on Saturdays at 10 a.m.? Are we staying at school until 6 or 7 p.m.? Are we spreading ourselves too thin on multiple committees or community events?

The process of a teacher burning out can be slow because it takes time to recognize it. Burnout happens when there is nothing left inside; one can't give what one doesn't have or never had in the first place. Eventually, apathy and lack of concern appear, and then it's almost too late to get that spark back. What can administrators do to renew it?

Building a culture of wellness at school requires leaders to act as role models; they must participate in developing a healthy culture. First, they should stress—and recognize—the importance of taking breaks and unplugging, and make a healthy diet a priority.

One urban school district has established a wellness committee that focuses on the whole person and incentivizes time. Members include administrators, and the committee helps teachers focus on themselves and their overall health to prevent burnout. A spokesperson for the committee says they:

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- Encourage positive habits of mental, physical, and emotional health;
- Inspire holistic wellness to support the mind, body, and spirit;
- Increase awareness of the factors and resources that contribute to professional and personal well-being;
- Motivate and empower individuals to achieve personal health goals and lifestyle balance; and
- Support a sense of community, collaboration, and camaraderie in the district.

Wednesdays are half-days that allow for professional development and school meetings to take place during contract hours. Also, the district provides more days off during breaks to allow teachers to rejuvenate and refresh. Here are some other things each person can do:

**Meditate or journal.** If we are to engage with other people as educators, we must examine our thoughts, reactions, and motives. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” Socrates said, and we all need to be true to ourselves. We can work only in areas within our control, however. A journal or private blog might help us develop perspective.

**Seek wisdom.** One of the symptoms of burnout is isolation. It's important to have a confidant to share successes and challenges with, and mentors such as colleagues, former classmates, former instructors and professors, and leaders in one's specialized professional associations can help. Finding a person you can trust is a vital step, because it will lead to more trusting relationships.

**Form a community.** Building and maintaining community is critical in the school environment, and that need was highlighted from the start of the pandemic. Teachers and administrators

found creative, meaningful ways to create connections and maintain them.

Some grade-level teams met on Zoom and started collaborations by telling what they had for lunch; others met during morning coffee and shared how they were faring with home-schooling their own children while also connecting with students and families. When teachers feel there is community, they are more likely to remain in their posts and seek ways to improve their practice.

### Help Teachers Refocus

It's the heart that brings a teacher into the profession; we fell in love with the art and science of teaching. Therefore, you must help them refocus on the “why” of teaching if they experience burnout. How much of themselves have they given away in the process? Did they give their all and expect instant results? Helping teachers realize that they can't make a difference for every single student every single day can give them the freedom to be kinder to themselves.

There is no quick solution to overcoming burnout. It doesn't happen overnight, and it can't be repaired in a single day. But if you can set the school culture to wellness, you'll show you care about teachers' souls at each step of their journey. If we can take care of ourselves, we can help our teachers renew their spark and help students become the very best that they can be. ●

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### Signs of Burnout

Teachers experiencing burnout might:

1. Appear physically depleted.
2. Isolate themselves from friends, family, and colleagues.
3. Express negative self-talk.
4. Start criticizing and devaluing everything about work.
5. Make mountains out of molehills—every little problem becomes a huge ordeal.