



Distress Signals

Teachers are more anxious, fearful, and worried during the pandemic, and it's up to principals to help them maintain mental wellness

BY VICTORIA E. ROMERO

In 2018, nearly 500,000 teachers in nine states walked out of their classrooms in the middle of the year, making it the largest worker strike ever recorded in the United States.

Salaries, benefits, and class sizes were major issues, but this time, those were not the only concerns. For the first time, teachers acknowledged they could not adequately meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Their demands included a call for more school counselors and nurses.

Educators walking out in the middle of a school year and asking for support from mental health specialists was a red flag for me as a consultant, former teacher, and former principal. Generally, educators don't strike in February.

What did this suggest about the well-being of teachers in general and, in particular, about the brave men and women on the picket lines carrying signs reading "Enough Is Enough"?

I found answers in two surveys conducted by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. In spring 2017, nearly 7,000 educators working in public and independent schools were asked to describe the three most frequent emotions they felt every day at school. The top three emotions among public school teachers were frustrated, overwhelmed, and stressed, while teachers in independent schools felt frustrated, joyful/happy, and excited.

Researchers Marc Brackett and Christina Cipriano conducted a similar survey in March 2020 to see how teachers were managing emotionally during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. In three days, more than 5,000 respondents said they were

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anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad.

Negative emotions compromise a teacher's physical and emotional health. Teachers who are distressed have difficulty relating to others, focusing their attention, making decisions, and recalling facts. The surveys made it clear: We need to be worried about our teaching corps.

Creating a Supportive Climate

Now more than ever, principals need to help teachers put their own oxygen masks on before they assist others. A healthy school climate in which teachers are heard, supported, and empowered is most important. Principals need to lead with teacher emotions in mind and become familiar with actions that nurture resilience.

To start, ask your staff, "How are you managing stress?" to create a baseline of self-care needs. Use this information to begin development of a school self-care plan that nurtures community resilience and communicates that you're in this together. Encouraging each staff member to develop a self-care plan after sharing the school community plan also lets staff know that you mean business.

Investigate practices that foster resilience, and create routines and calendar check-in reminders to support them. Be intentional about encouraging laughter or compassion. Bryan Sexton, director of the Duke Center for Healthcare Safety and Quality, calls these moments "bite-size resiliency." Opening a staff meeting by sharing a funny story you heard from a student, texting a quick message of

gratitude to a colleague, or writing down three good things are examples.

Gerry Brooks, former principal of Liberty Elementary School in Lexington, Kentucky, is education's Jimmy Fallon or James Corden; he posts hilarious YouTube videos about the work we do. A favorite of mine when providing professional development on resilience is "Social Stories for Teachers," a humorous video that can help start serious conversations about creating community self-care plans. Laughter floods our bodies with happy hormones.

Relationships are important to health and well-being. But relationships with colleagues are especially vital, because compassion and empathy are built-in. Encourage each staff member to create a self-care plan and lead by example. Make sure each teacher is matched with a self-care partner at school or somewhere in the district to serve as personal (emotional) trainers for one another. They can check in to see how self-care plans are progressing.

Practicing Mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness was first introduced to Western medical practitioners in 1970 by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Since then, multiple studies have shown that the practice of mindfulness not only improves memory, cognitive function, concentration, and physical health, but also reduces anxiety, distress, and implicit bias. Mindfulness helps to cultivate moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, and surroundings.

Mindfulness not only gives us control over our emotions, but also increases our capacity to think clearly and examine mistaken judgments. Organizations such as the Space Between community offer professional development in mindfulness practice tailored to educators. It's a solution that is worth the time to investigate as you create your self-care plan to improve teacher well-being—and it might even address other lingering inequities in our school systems. ●

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