

# Two Tracks Toward Wellness

Address students' and teachers' mental health with a two-pronged strategy

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The hallways are shiny and waxed; the classrooms are clean and organized; the supply cabinets are freshly stocked with the tools of school. Like a blank canvas, the new school year is sheer potential and possibility.

Teachers—eager to move past the extraordinary challenges of the last few years—are looking forward to reconnecting with students and revisiting the “whys” of their profession: to teach, to learn, to inspire, and to be inspired. But it would be irresponsible to ignore the recent data reporting high rates of burnout that are leading to teacher shortages and increased workloads.

For school mental health professionals, walking through the halls over the last few school years has led to many challenging and heartfelt conversations with fellow educators. Teachers and administrators half-jokingly ask, “Can I get counseling, too?” with a tangible undercurrent of need.

When there is enough time and space to respond with full authenticity, these moments often result in tearful conversations about the stressful nature of working in schools. Broaching the topics of stress and well-being with educators can be like drinking from a fire hydrant: Once the spigot is opened, a flood ensues.

While research into education and mental health focuses primarily on children and adolescents, there is a growing sense that focusing solely on counseling children—though imperative—is akin to putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg. Evidence from neuropsychology and educational research is mounting that the affective systems of teachers and students are interconnected, and focusing on direct support for children without considering the needs of teachers simultaneously yields disappointing results.

As a school administrator, you must recognize the needs of your teachers to mitigate the impact of stress and burnout and help everyone move ahead into the new school year feeling valued and cared for. Below, we illuminate the emotional labor of teaching and explore a two-pronged approach designed to impact teacher well-being at a systemic level, as well as direct individual support.

### THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF TEACHING

Having conversations about stress and wellness can be challenging for educators. They are often disinclined to share their own feelings and vulnerabilities with school administrators for fear that doing so will impact their employment. Conversations are also constrained by school structure and policies.

Broad supervisory responsibility makes it a challenge to block out enough time to unpack stress. Policies such as the distinction between sick and personal days are in place that make it difficult to prioritize well-being. In general, teachers have not traditionally wielded sufficient institutional power to self-advocate with confidence.

The conversation around teacher well-being can also be challenging for school administrators who are responsible for fully ensuring competent adult supervision and instruction at all times and are faced with staff shortages. It can also be difficult for administrators to have conversations about social-emotional competence when they are dealing with significant stressors themselves.

Principals used to giving highly effective instructional feedback are often hesitant to address performance-related concerns about mood, demeanor, or emotional expression. Giving and receiving effective feedback in the social-emotional domain might feel like a personal criticism rather than a technical observation.

We also see many school districts experience initiative paralysis: They fear that launching any new initiative such as one focused on well-being might make it look like they are ignoring other significant issues. Conversely, initiative “overdrive” often leaves districts with multiple, overlapping layers of task forces, committees, PLCs, timelines, and Google Docs. The result is that everyone is too tired to be creative or to take on “one more thing”—even if that thing is self-care.

Many teachers start the school week already feeling run-down. The teacher’s default emotional and mental state affects students and the climate they inhabit together, so the effect they face from a poor night’s sleep, bad traffic on the way to school, or a sick family member can influence how students feel stress, too.

## Create goals that are known by every stakeholder in the community, then start practicing together.

### A TWO-PRONGED SOLUTION

The post-pandemic educational landscape offers a unique opportunity for schools to enhance the well-being of the entire school system and those teaching in it. As a solution to the nationwide crisis of teacher burnout, we present an approach that invites teachers to attend to their own well-being through self-directed strategies and whole-school implementation of practices intended to create a climate centered on teacher wellness.

**1. Self-directed strategies.** The responsibility to reduce stress does not rely solely on teachers. But when teachers grow their self-care practice, the impact on the classroom experience and students becomes more apparent to other teachers, administrators, students, and families. When colleagues see their peers handle stress more effectively, become more able to relax, and enjoy their students more, they want to have the same experiences.

By learning and repeating well-being practices, educators can gradually turn burnout into a state of increased capacity and wellness. The holistic wellness practices below are designed to create balance in order to live a life rich with connection and peace. These include:

- Mindful self-awareness and self-assessment;
- Mindful movement, breath work, and stretching;
- “No zones” and “hard stops” to work at home;
- Well-being buddies/allies for accountability; and
- Daily rituals for pause and intention (meditation, affirmation).

**2. Whole-school implementation.** Schools care best for our youth when they care about the teachers who teach our youth. We know that teachers who practice and implement self-care need encouragement and support to sustain their efforts even when they and others see the benefits of implementing well-being practices in their personal and professional lives. We have found that the districts that have the most success integrating teacher well-being into the fabric of school climate and culture do two things well: They plan together, and they practice together.

## Core Concepts: Educator Wellness

When looking to implement well-being practices across a school building or system, the mission is to start with intentionality. Define practices at the system level for every stakeholder in the building: What does practicing, modeling, and messaging well-being look like for district leaders, building administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, security guards, school clerks, parents, and students? Create goals that are known by every stakeholder in the community, then start practicing together. Embed these practices and opportunities to make well-being the center of the school day.

Below are some ideas that principals can use to create systemic self-care:

- Creating schoolwide well-being calendars.
- Applying breath work or intentional pauses at meeting starts.
- Practicing schoolwide mindfulness and skills-based professional development.
- Giving the gift of time by eliminating at least one new initiative, curriculum, or committee from teachers' responsibilities.
- Paring down teachers' workload by taking something off their plates so they can get caught up.
- Offering access to free individual counseling or telehealth services.
- Handling cranky parents and community members decisively, without asking teachers to be a buffer.
- Giving teachers training on how to deescalate other adults (parents, colleagues, partners, etc.) and build confidence.
- Removing signs on the faculty lounge that say "Teachers Only" or suggesting that only certified staff are welcome to create an emotionally supportive environment.
- Making a happy place to gather by keeping the faculty lounge stocked with healthy snacks, fresh fruit,

coffee, and tea, and giving it a fresh coat of paint and good lighting.

- Planning kid-friendly outdoor cookouts for staff so teachers don't need to get child care.
- Providing a hot lunch for teachers and staff once a week on Tuesday or Wednesday (midweek is ideal, so if they forget and pack a lunch they can still eat it the next day).
- Offering gift items that save teachers time instead of school swag, such as grocery or meal delivery, house-cleaning services, and laundry pickup/drop-off.
- Supporting classroom management by giving flextime to teachers to observe the school's best classroom managers.

The purpose of the focus on repairing and mitigating burnout among teachers is not to strain already depleted systems with more tasks, but instead to create opportunities for change that deepen the well of capacity for a population that has been on the front lines and is experiencing an unprecedented level of toxic stress.

Shifting the narrative from students' needs only to prioritize the well-being and needs of teachers in a meaningful, consistent, whole-system way is both a responsive and preventative solution. Burnout and retention rates are a cause for alarm, and it is our moral obligation to care about the well-being of those who have dedicated their lives to educating the country's youth. ●

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- Teachers often find it difficult to discuss their own vulnerabilities with school administrators for fear that it will impact their employment or effectiveness.
- Research says that the well-being of teachers and students are connected, so focusing only on supplying mental health supports for children won't yield optimal results.
- Encouraging teachers to help themselves destress while creating a school culture that supports ongoing self-care can help mitigate toxic stress and burnout.



### Countering Burnout

An NEA survey released in January revealed that 90% of teachers said that feeling burned out is a serious problem, with two-thirds (67%) rating it "very serious." Raising educator salaries garnered nearly universal support (96%) as a solution, followed by providing additional mental health supports for students (94%), hiring more teachers (93%) and support staff (92%), and reducing paperwork (90%).