



Supporting Educator Mental Health and Well-Being

Over the past several years, educators have found themselves at the center of both public health debates and cultural flashpoints. The disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with highly partisan battles related to vaccinations and mask mandates, and debates related to curriculum on the history of racism, sex education, and LGBTQ+ rights, have put an enormously unprecedented strain on the educational system and the educators that work in it. In the 2021-22 school year, about one-quarter of teachers said their choice of curriculum or instructional practices were affected by limitations on how they could address topics related to race or gender identity.¹

Even though most parents are generally satisfied with the performance of their local schools,² the upheaval, uncertainty, and confusion that have engulfed many school districts have resulted in schools becoming increasingly difficult environments to work in, even leading to increased physical and verbal aggression towards educators from both students and parents in some cases.³ Between the growing challenges many face at work, many of which are unrelated to educating, and the overall societal and personal stressors that so many Americans continue to experience, *educator well-being and willingness to persist in the profession has taken a significant toll.*

Educators are stressed and burnt out

Teacher turnover was a concern even before COVID-19, especially in schools that are historically under-resourced.^{4, 5, 6} Since the start of the pandemic, significant numbers report frequently experiencing job-related stress and large majorities find their jobs to be much more stressful as compared to before the pandemic.⁷ Teachers who taught primarily low-income students and/or students with learning disabilities were the most likely to report feeling burnt out.⁸ Furthermore, the pandemic has been especially challenging for educators of color and new educators first entering the classroom. Despite these difficulties, large majorities of teachers still intend to remain in the profession, but many—including those who had not planned on doing so prior to COVID-19—are considering leaving.^{9, 10}

Educator well-being leads to student success

Teacher well-being is intrinsically linked to that of their students. Research shows that burnout and stress impact teachers' ability to manage classroom behavior, build close relationships, and provide effective instruction.^{11, 12} High levels of teacher burnout or exhaustion can lead to increased stress among students and lower academic outcomes.^{13, 14} Data show that when teacher morale, confidence, and enthusiasm about teaching are high, students are more interested and engaged in the classroom.¹⁵

Educators need more mental and emotional health support

There has been much necessary discussion about the best way to provide social and emotional supports to students. However, for these efforts to be successful, it is critical that the social and emotional needs of educators are also addressed.¹⁶ Providing teachers with social and emotional supports has been shown to benefit students and school communities. Schools with teachers and administrators who have strong personal social and emotional skills have better school climates and increased social, emotional, and academic development of their students.^{17, 18}

Despite the current challenges, teachers remain resilient, committed to their students, and hopeful about their own future in the profession.¹⁹ Many believe that they can grow as teaching professionals and that students can learn through effective teaching and hard work.

As school districts and policymakers look to continue recovering from the pandemic and make systemic changes to how we approach education, including by recruiting and retaining a diverse educator workforce, investing in their mental and emotional well-being will be essential.

Policy Recommendations

Establish and operate educator well-being and mental health programs.

- Build school environments where mental health wellness for both students, educators, and school personnel is prioritized.
- Provide more access to telehealth counseling.
- Build support networks and peer-to-peer mentorship programs.
- Provide training and support systems for educators that focus on coping with stress, building resilience, mindfulness, self-care, and wellness strategies.
- Offer counseling services, either school-based or through community partnerships.

Educators should also be provided opportunities to have their voices heard and perspectives included in decision-making.

- Engage in regular data collection through engagement surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups with educators, to help monitor how well they are doing physically, emotionally, mentally, and professionally, and to identify what supports and programs are needed.
- Conduct annual school, state, and national anonymous reporting surveys on the extent and types of stressors that educators and all school personnel experience and recommend solutions.

Along with providing more training on social and emotional learning and trauma-informed teaching practices, teacher preparation programs must also recognize the social and emotional needs of educators themselves.

- Integrate skills and best practices on coping mechanisms, stress management, and wellness in educator preparation curricula and courses.
- Include psychologists, counselors, and social workers on educator-preparation program advisory councils and work with them to help educator-preparation faculty learn practical ways to support teachers' social and emotional needs in the school setting.

Improving the mental health and well-being of students would also help educators in reducing stress and burn-out and boosting morale.

- Increase funding for federal programs and pass legislation that would improve the overall commitment to mental health and wellness promotion in schools by growing the school-based mental health workforce and enhancing school climate.

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