

The Big Connection Between Teachers' Burnout and Their Principals



By Sarah D. Sparks — September 21, 2022

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With staffing shortages, stagnant achievement scores, and rising student need, a majority of teachers face intense stress as the school year ramps up.

“It’s been really hard, the last three years, and here we are on a fourth school year. We’re fully back, but things are very different,” said Corey Basmajian, the principal of Francis Scott Key Elementary-Middle School in Baltimore, who started the school year still

recuperating from a bout of COVID. That's why he said it's been critical to "not be the straw that breaks the camel's back" for his teachers.

Basmajian's instincts were right, a new international analysis suggests. The study measured teacher stress and burnout across 20 countries, including the United States, and found that teachers are mostly on par with people in other professions in dealing with stress since the pandemic, contrary to some other media reports.

One factor that contributes to teachers' stress levels is their bosses. After controlling for teachers' workload and personal characteristics, the researchers found that principals' leadership and management approaches significantly affected educators' ability to deal with changes and challenges in the classroom.

"On the organizational level, there is some indication that when school principals contribute to a supportive school climate and avoid demanding practices, teachers experience less stress and burnout," said the researchers, led by Andrea Westphal of the Interdisciplinary Research on Teaching, Learning and School Development program at University of Greifswald in Germany. For example, the study found that while reducing teachers' overall time in remote instruction was only minimally associated with lower stress levels, teachers whose principals gave them more autonomy in instruction showed fewer burnout symptoms. Moreover, while K-12 teachers' stress levels were on par with those of their managers, teachers were more likely to feel "helpless."

Nearly 60 percent of teachers and 48 percent of principals in the United States report they have burned out on their work, according to a RAND study conducted earlier this year.

School leaders play a role

Teachers whose leaders ramped up pressure on teachers and tried to control their behaviors more during the pandemic had significantly higher levels of "emotional exhaustion," a key indicator of burnout, according to prior studies.

In addition, the international study found the most effective teacher interventions combine stress management support with training, such as in technology use.

Danna Thomas, a former Baltimore City Schools kindergarten teacher and founder of Happy Teacher Revolution, which works with schools to improve teacher support, said

while it's important to incorporate direct supports for teacher well-being into day-to-day work, "principals need to be self-aware when it comes to the communication with their staff about burnout and self-care."

For example, Thomas often sees leaders mistakenly "sending staffwide emails saying 'Make sure you take care of yourself and read this article on self-care—oh, and here are all the things that are due by close of business.'"

"That kind of mixed messaging leads to even more animosity and angst, not only towards the leadership, but also towards self care and well-being itself," Thomas said. "That might have been a really great article on self-care, but how many people actually open it and read it and take it to heart when in the same exact email are all of the deadlines?"

Even policies previously intended to empower teachers need a review, Basmajian said. For example, before the pandemic, he incorporated a few different professional development sessions in every staff meeting, allowing teachers to choose training that interested them. But starting last year, in response to teachers' fatigue, Basmajian said he stripped out regular staff meetings and most regular planning meetings.

"I didn't want to be like the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of, 'we're going to have another meeting and we're going to add this to your plate,'" he said. "Looking back, you know, we lost a little bit by not having some meetings—by not coming together and talking about math data or pacing the [English language arts]. But the trade-off was we retained staff, and our people didn't leave the profession."

That's in line with the international study, which found teachers whose leaders worked to empower them developed better "workplace buoyancy," the ability to cope with repeated stress and challenges.