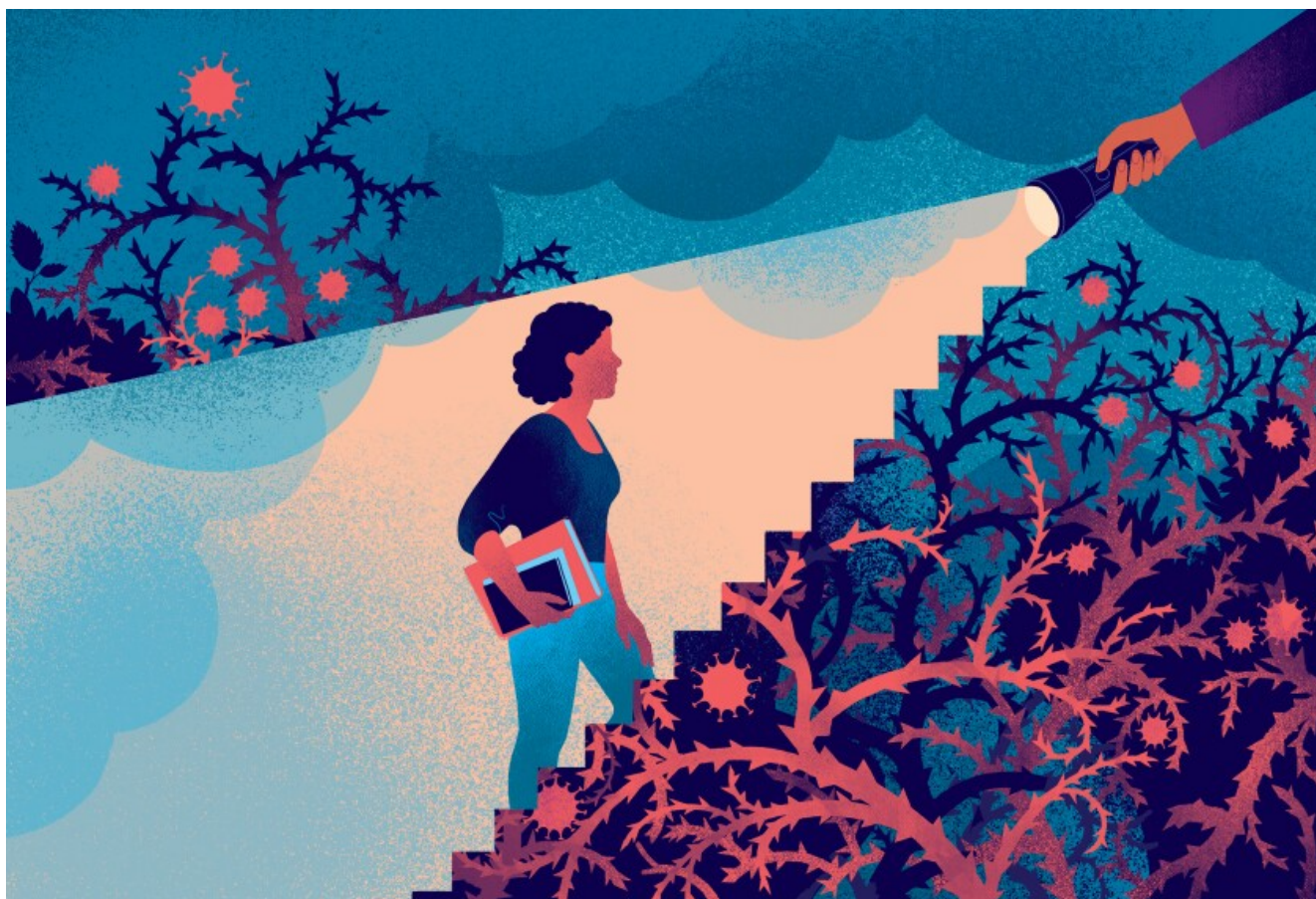


Don't Forget the Adults: How Schools and Districts Can Support Educator Mental Health



Student mental health is at the forefront of educators' minds these days after two years of pandemic-driven stress and disruption—but district leaders forget about the adults in the school building at their own peril, experts say.

About 1 in 4 teachers said [they were experiencing symptoms of depression](#)

in an early 2021 survey by the RAND Corp., a research group and think tank. In a separate survey, RAND also found that most secondary school principals

were experiencing frequent job-related stress

—and one

of their big stressors was supporting teachers' mental health and well-being.

Left unaddressed, that stress could lead to a massive exodus of educators. Despite that, only a third of district and school leaders said they have made counselors or mental health services available to staff since the start of the pandemic or added to the mental health services already offered, according to a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey of nearly 900 educators conducted in January and February.

Forty-four percent of those who responded said they have offered or increased their offerings of professional development on self-care, which educators and experts say is not enough on its own to address clinical mental health needs. And 17 percent said they have not taken any steps to address staff mental health needs during the pandemic even though their current offerings are inadequate.

Targeted mental health support for staff is crucial for a thriving school environment, experts say.

“Teacher well-being is incredibly important, not only for them but for their students' learning experiences as well,” said Leigh McLean, an assistant research professor at the Center for Research in Education & Social Policy at the University of Delaware.

Her research has found that teachers with depression spend [less time doing whole-class instruction](#)

—likely because it's more demanding and energy-intensive—and have fewer warm and responsive interactions with students. They also spend less time planning and organizing their lessons.

Having structural supports for teacher mental health will ultimately benefit everyone in the school building, including school leaders. If teachers and students have access to counseling and other mental health support, that's a heavy burden taken off their principals' backs.

Building a culture of support

McLean's research has found that teachers' mental health and commitment to their career is better protected when they experience more support and autonomy from school leaders. Having colleagues whom teachers can turn to for help also boosts mental health, she said.

In preliminary research, McLean found that during the pandemic, certain teachers are struggling with their mental health more than others: teachers of color, early-career teachers, and those in high-needs schools.

Ronn Nozoe, the chief executive officer of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has advocated for districts and schools to use some of their federal COVID-19 relief funds to set up targeted support programs for school leaders' mental health.

However, there's a huge demand for mental health care professionals nationally, and school districts may be competing with others with deeper pockets.

Additionally, Nozoe said, even school leaders who know the importance of mental health care are more willing to spend available funds on students and teachers than themselves. And there's still a stigma around mental health, he said.

"It's not for lack of want, it's not for lack of ideas," Nozoe said. "It's really a lack of available professionals who are willing and qualified to provide these kinds of services to help kids and families and ultimately educators."

How can school leaders best respond to these pressures? One way is to take stock of their resources, make workers aware of them, and ensure they're available.

In May, the Colorado School of Public Health's Center for Health, Work, & Environment partnered with the University of Colorado's Depression Center to [launch a workplace mental health module](#)

—an online tool kit for employers to take stock of the management and workplace strategies they have in place to address the mental health of their staff. Employers take a survey that assesses their workplace culture, employee benefits, education and training, and equity and accessibility.

The module is open to all employers in the country, including schools. So far, five districts in Colorado have signed on, including the Denver public schools, said David Shapiro, the program manager for Health Links at CHWE, which distributes the module. These districts typically score high on employee benefits for mental health, he said, but there was a need for more education and training.

For example, all school employees should learn how to access available supports for their own mental health needs. And schools should establish peer-support programs, so some employees learn "how to be an ally or 'askable' adult for their colleague to get the support they need," Shapiro said. He recommends that districts train certain teachers or other staff members so there are "champions for mental health within the school district" who aren't in leadership positions. (After all, it can be intimidating to confide in your boss, Shapiro noted.)

Also, school and district leaders should make sure they're sharing information about mental health benefits in an equitable way, he said. Some school staffers, like bus drivers, might not check their emails as frequently as teachers—so principals should consider delivering the information through nonelectronic methods, like posters or mailers, too. Also, the information should be available in multiple languages.

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Sarah Broome, education consultant

And school leaders must create a workplace culture where people can be open about mental health, he said.

It's important to have "people be willing to share their stories, and I think this starts with leaders," Shapiro said. "[They can tell staff], 'This pandemic has been challenging for my own mental health—here's how it impacted me, and I've used my mental health benefits [to get help]'. The more we can build the story of mental health, the more we can spread awareness, the more we can reduce stigma."

Partnerships to Uplift Communities Schools, or PUC, which serves students in northeast Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley in California, has counseling sessions available for students, teachers, and principals. Max Valadez, the principal of PUC Lakeview Charter Academy, said those sessions have helped him navigate challenges in his personal life and served him in his role as a school leader.

"As a principal, there are so many moving pieces, sometimes I just need to talk to somebody who is not going to judge or anything like that—just to let me know if I am doing things correctly or if I'm not," Valadez said.

Modeling and demonstrating concern for mental health

When Sarah Broome was the executive director of Thrive Academy, a statewide public boarding school in Baton Rouge, La., everybody on staff knew when her weekly therapy appointment was because she spoke about it so freely. Broome, who resigned as the executive director in June 2021 and is now an education consultant, said that openness about mental health helped lessen any stigma for other adults in the building to get help.

When students returned to campus in August 2020 after the initial coronavirus shutdowns, Paul Sampson, Thrive's principal at the time, and Chelsea Trice, the school's head social worker, decided that it wasn't enough to prioritize students' mental health—they needed to offer robust support to educators, too. Broome agreed.

"We are not a place that cares about mental health unless we care about mental health for everybody, and that includes our adults on campus," Broome said. "Teaching was really hard before the pandemic, and it's only gotten exponentially more so. Teachers need places to process [their feelings]."

The school began offering teachers the option to participate in individual therapy sessions with school social workers every other week. (Thrive later hired contract social workers, in case teachers felt more comfortable talking with someone who wasn't on staff.) The social workers kept all information shared during the sessions confidential but also compiled top-level trends and shared that data with administrators.

Moreover, the school held weekly group therapy meetings where teachers could talk about specific student academic and social-emotional needs and discuss the best strategies to take. The meetings allowed administrators to hear teachers' concerns and address them immediately, Broome said.

But none of this work was an overnight fix, she said. And teachers were able to go to these therapy sessions because school leadership had built significant amounts of teacher planning time into the schedule.

"You can't mental-health-support your way out of structural challenges," Broome said. "There is literally nothing you can do for a teacher who is not able to go to the bathroom all day."

Valadez, the Lakeview Charter Academy principal, has also been trying to find ways to reduce the strain on his teachers, especially those who've had to fill in for colleagues who're absent because of COVID-19.

A few nonteaching staff members have recently obtained their teacher-substitute permits, and the charter school network also contracted with a substitute company, which allows the school to have a substitute ready if a teacher gives two weeks' notice that he or she will be absent. Both changes reduce the frequency teachers will be called upon to fill in for peers—eliminating a huge stressor.

Outside resources and partnerships can help

The PUC charter schools network relies heavily on graduate interns studying American family therapy—a cheaper way to staff counseling programs for students and educators, since the interns are not paid and are getting experience and credit toward their degrees.

That program was started in the early 2000s and is run by Christine Sartiaguda, a licensed marital and family therapist who also has a doctorate in education. It has grown from Sartiaguda and 16 interns to include 50 to 60 clinical interns annually, working under a team of five licensed clinical supervisors. While the program was initially geared to support students, teachers and school leaders were always able to tap into it. But the outreach to teachers and principals became more systematic since the pandemic.

“With COVID, we realized that it wasn't a matter of waiting for the teachers to ask, it was about us being proactive—recognizing and just seeing the impact COVID has had on teachers trying to pivot to online learning,” she said. “They look tired, they look stressed, and we just need to provide the support and hope they take advantage of it.”

Just one month after the initial shutdown in spring 2020, Sartiaguda started offering teacher-support groups via Zoom. By fall of the 2020-21 school year, those groups were available at all the network's campuses. Staff meetings include meditation and mindfulness exercises. Professional development has self-care for teachers—“simple, simple ways that they can fit in one minute of mindfulness in their day, just to kind of disconnect from the chaos of having to practice and teach,” she said.

Sartiaguda's staff can tailor supports to meet individual schools' needs.

“If a [school] leader comes to us and says, ‘I've had a lot of my teachers who've experienced deaths in their families since COVID began, can you do a specific group just addressing grief and loss?,’ the answer is yes,” she said. “Whatever the need is, we can accommodate it.”

Because the interns are receiving their degrees in marital and family therapy, their primary focus in schools remains getting experience in those areas.

“But we have really restructured our program to include the teacher piece,” Sartiaguda said. In addition, her team provides referrals to low-cost counselors and therapists in the community.

Getting buy-in from educators

Although teachers are stressed, not all are taking advantage of the mental health resources the PUC network is offering, Sartiaguda said.

After the end of a long day, some teachers did not want to log on to Zoom for another hour—even if they knew the benefits, she said.

“We do try sometimes to offer it during lunchtime, and sometimes teachers say, ‘You know what. I just want to eat my lunch [or] I need to prep.’” But she added, “what we emphasize is, it is here if you change your mind. If you reach a point of, ‘Well, I actually want to make time for this support,’ it is absolutely available.”

Valadez, who became the principal of PUC Lakeview Charter Academy just a few months before the pandemic, said about 20 percent of the school’s teachers have taken advantage of the on-site counselors over the last two years. Some needed help with family issues such as deaths in the family and anxiety related to a child heading off to college amid a pandemic.

Valadez knows that some teachers may be uncomfortable speaking with him and the assistant principal about professional and personal problems, so he always lets them know that “there’s somebody else they can talk to.”

Jennifer Lopez, a teacher at PUC Community Charter Elementary School in Los Angeles, started a self-care committee shortly after the shutdown in March 2020, with the support of Principal Jocelyn Velez, to help teachers focus on their well-being, develop coping skills, and provide other support, amid the pandemic.

Both say the committee will become a permanent part of the school going forward.

“One of the teachers said, ‘This is the one meeting I can miss but the one meeting I don’t want to miss because I need this type of support,’ ” Velez said. “That’s always really nice to hear.”

The topics Lopez tackles during the meetings, which initially were held over Zoom, come from teacher surveys and feedback. She’s also organized book studies on wellbeing and hosted sessions on yoga and financial wellness.

Now back on campus, the group continues to meet weekly. Administrators have also joined in, including on a recent nature walk.

“It’s been really cool to bring that community back to campus,” Lopez said. “It’s been really awesome to have our admin support and [have] them thinking of ways for us to take care of our mental health.”

Weekly emails go beyond self-help pick-me-ups, Velez said, and provide concrete tips and techniques that teachers can use to weather this traumatic period.

This semester, the group is studying Tina Boogren’s *180 Days of Self-Care for Busy Educators*, a guide to helping educators find the right balance.

Lopez recently hosted a “vision board” activity to help staff members visualize both their professional and personal intentions.

“It was nice to take that time in our busy lives to sit down, cut out pictures, and print out pictures, and sit down with our staff members, and talk about our goals in a very genuine way,” said Velez. “In a time of chaos, ... allowing ourselves to be ourselves, bringing that person behind the professional into the classrooms with a group of teachers—that was very impactful, I think.”

Principals can create an environment in which teachers know they can go to their bosses and say they need to take a break, Velez said. She has been encouraging teachers to take the day off when they need to and she’s been modeling that behavior to staff.

“We have a trusting relationship at our school and we’ve built that culture—it’s taken some time, but it’s that trust,” Velez said.

For example, a teacher, who is pregnant, recently texted Velez one night saying that her feet were swollen.

Velez responded, “You can take the day off tomorrow,” she said. “I would just need to know so I can get a sub. But we want you to be healthy, we want you to take care of yourself. We want you to follow the doctor’s orders. So, if it means extra rest—take the day off.

“It’s really letting them know it’s going to be OK,” she said. “I just want you to take care of yourself.”