

Teachers Aren't Burnt Out. They Are Being Set Up to Fail

Instead of scapegoating teachers, focus on the lousy school systems, ignorant officials, or out-of-touch administrators

By Alexandra Robbins — May 05, 2023

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Penny's situation was a familiar one for educators.

The middle school math teacher worried she was burnt out. Her district had instituted an intense new set of math curriculum standards without providing resources to cover those lessons. She was constantly sick from the mold in her classroom, but when she reported it to administrators, they only painted over the mold. Rather than run serious student-disciplinary issues up the chain, her principal sent students back to class as if nothing had happened.

And Penny was beleaguered by parents who made ridiculous requests, such as "My children like it when their teachers attend their sports events. Your attendance at all of the attached games would be appreciated" and "Did you get the homework out of Brentley's locker?"

Historically, teachers' rates of "job strain," stress from high demand/low control work, are higher than the average rate of all workers. A joint American Federation of Teachers and Badass Teachers Association survey revealed that

almost two-thirds of educators find work “always” or “often” stressful.

The media often use the phrase “teacher burnout” to describe educators’ stress, exhaustion, and overwork. But after interviewing hundreds of teachers nationwide for my book *The Teachers: A Year Inside America’s Most Vulnerable, Important Profession*, I believe “teacher burnout” is a myth—and the term should be ditched.

Experts have identified several causes of teacher burnout, including inadequate workplace support and resources; unmanageable workload; high-stakes testing; time pressure; unsupported, disruptive students; and a wide variety of student needs without the resources to meet them. Penny, whom I followed for a year for the book, experienced all of these issues, as do many teachers.

Coverage of teacher stress and burnout often emphasizes the negative effects of teachers’ stress on students. Pennsylvania State University researchers described a “burnout cascade” with “devastating effects on classroom relationships, management, and climate,” in which burned-out teachers become emotionally exhausted, can’t manage “troublesome student behaviors,” and quit. Or, the researchers claimed, surprisingly specifically, that teachers cope “by maintaining a rigid classroom climate enforced by hostile and sometimes harsh measures [while] bitterly working at a suboptimal level of performance until retirement.” Authors of a 2020 study concluded that, “as hypothesized,” students viewed teachers reporting higher levels of burnout as “significantly less socially and emotionally competent.”

Telling teachers to relax doesn’t cut it.

As I read those examples of teacher burnout literature, I was dogged by an unsettled feeling: While researchers mostly seemed sympathetic to teachers, their conclusions sometimes portrayed educators in a way I found disconcerting. Then I read two relatively splashy studies that crystallized what bothered me. A Belgian study warned of “burnout contagion,” in which teachers can “catch” burnout from colleagues. The researchers concluded that because teachers in close coworker relationships exhibited similar levels of burnout, their study “indeed demonstrated that burnout is—to some extent—contagious.”

In another paper, University of British Columbia researchers said that teachers experiencing higher burnout levels had students with higher morning cortisol levels. They called this transference “stress contagion,” claiming, “it is possible that spending most of the school day in interaction with a stressed and burned-out teacher is taxing for students and can affect their physiological stress profile.” The resulting media headlines further sensationalized the issue. A Quartz website article, titled “Classroom Contagion: Stress in the classroom can be as contagious as the flu,” discussed “stressed teachers propagating at-risk students by ‘infecting’ them with elevated cortisol.”

But the authors of the stress contagion study didn’t test the same students’ cortisol levels with a control teacher who was not, as they put it, “stressed and burned out.” The students may have stressed out the teachers, rather than the other way around. Or, more likely, school conditions were stressing out both teachers and students alike, and the teachers were being blamed.

The takeaways instead depicted teacher burnout as a contagion that brought down coworkers and students, with teachers as the disease vectors. Rather than address the root causes stressing out teachers in the first place—insufficient classroom resources, support staff and administrative support; lack of input into decisions; unpaid overtime; high-stakes testing; and lack of disciplinary and other policy enforcement, all of which make a teacher’s job harder and a student’s experience worse—the messages scapegoated educators who are put in the impossible position of being ordered to meet shifting and expanding expectations by districts that don’t give them the tools necessary to do so. Burned-out teachers aren’t “significantly less socially and emotionally competent.” They’re handicapped by lousy school systems, ignorant officials, or out-of-touch administrators.

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The premise of teacher burnout is a convenient fiction that blames teachers for not being able to cope rather than faulting school systems that set both teachers and students up to fail. This line of thinking isn't meant to diminish educators' thoroughly justified feelings of helplessness, stress, sadness, anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion. But let's shift blame to where blame is due. Instead of presenting the problem as teachers having high or even the highest burnout levels of all U.S. industries, as a 2022 Gallup poll found, we should reframe the issue: School systems are the employers worst at providing necessary supports and resources for employees.

Bowdoin College education professor Doris Santoro also determined that "teacher burnout" is an inaccurate diagnosis that causes school leaders to tell teachers to learn how to relax. "It is the term most commonly used to refer to teachers who appear unhappy in their jobs, say they've considered quitting, or seem resistant to adopt the latest reform initiative," Santoro wrote in the *Phi Delta Kappan*. She prefers the term "teacher demoralization."

Telling teachers to relax doesn't cut it. A meta-analysis of 20 years of studies of the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing teacher burnout, including strategies such as therapy, mindfulness and relaxation, concluded that "intervention effectiveness is generally small."

Instead of asking teachers to do the impossible and calling them "burned out" when they can't, school leaders should fix the underlying causes—school climate, staffing numbers, and resources—not just to prevent employee demoralization, but because that's how a proper workplace should operate.

"Looking back, I wasn't burned out," Penny told me last month. "Our school was just a mess."