

Paul Horton: Students and Educators Suffer PTSD in the Chicago School Wars: The Road to Gatopia IV

By [Anthony Cody](#) on October 9, 2013 12:01 PM

Guest post by Paul Horton.

Depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD are reaching "epidemic proportions" among Chicago Public School teachers who teach at schools in underserved communities according to clinical social worker Stephen Rosenbaum, who serves on the national board for [Clinical Social Workers Association](#) (CSWA).

He is in contact with a network of twenty-one clinical social workers and psychiatrists in Chicago who discern a new pattern in cases involving CPS teachers.

Rosenbaum has treated hundreds of CPS teachers over the last twenty-five years who exhibit these symptoms, "but the numbers of clients who are CPS teachers report worsening symptoms during the last two years" as budget cuts, school closings, layoffs, mandated standardized testing, and teacher evaluations partially based on this standardized testing are implemented.

According to Rosenbaum,

constant disruption for teachers and students, and a more hostile work environment that pits principals who are under great pressure to institute reforms against teachers has led to an atmosphere of fear and alienation among teachers in lower performing schools especially.

These teachers worry about their students who face increasing difficult standardized tests, their evaluations, and the possibility of lower evaluations that can lead to transfers or termination. They are afraid to speak out against policies that they think harm kids because those who speak out are targeted for bad evaluations. As a result, more and more teachers experience utter hopelessness, worthlessness, and futility and are increasingly seeking clinicians for help.

"Suicidal ideation is not uncommon. We lost one CPS teacher to suicide this year, and many more are at risk," says Rosenbaum.

We have a public mental health crisis for both students and the teachers who serve them in our poorest neighborhoods and the community at large needs to do a better job of supporting students and teachers in need.

This was made more difficult last year when the city shut down or reduced services to several neighborhood facilities that support those with mental health issues that include veterans, victims of gun violence, sexual assault, domestic battery, and child abuse. This year, the number of CPS staff assigned to schools to deal with these and other issues was **also reduced by district-wide budget cuts** and building principals have been forced to make further cuts that often sacrifice counseling support staff.

Rosenbaum's observations reflect growing concern among educational leaders about morale within a

profession that seems to be under attack from all sides.

This also reinforces a little-noticed [report in the San Francisco Chronicle in 2007](#), which noted that:

As many as one-third of children living in our country's violent urban neighborhoods have PTSD, according to recent research and the country's top child trauma experts - nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq.

This can have dramatic effects on student behavior and academic performance:

PTSD can look a lot like attention-deficit disorder, ...with the lack of concentration, poor grades and inability to sit still. ...it almost guarantees that these students - often African American or Latino and low income - won't do as well on standardized tests as their wealthier, whiter and safer peers.

And what affects the lives of our students will surely affect the educators who work with them on a daily basis.

The most recent annual [MetLife Survey of the American Teacher](#) (2012) found that teacher job satisfaction has "dropped precipitously" in the last four years, including a drop of five percentage points in the last year as schools ramp up for the implementation of standardized testing based on the Common Core Standards. "Principals and teachers with low job satisfaction report higher levels of stress than do other educators and are more likely to work in high-needs schools." (p.4)

But the observations of Rosenbaum and his colleagues point to deeper issues beyond stress.

A 2012 [Chicago Tribune story](#) about a CPS teacher subjected to student violence suggested a much tougher reality for teachers in impoverished neighborhoods. Teacher Norma Brown began to experience symptoms of PTSD after she was attacked by a group of 11 and 12 year old students. "Like all victims of trauma, teachers can experience PTSD in different ways. Some have nightmares that can linger for years. Some rely on medication to get through their day. Others suffer from such severe anxiety that they cannot step foot back inside the school where they were attacked. A few abandon teaching altogether."

A far greater concern for the majority of teachers in underserved communities is caring for students who have witnessed shootings and stabbings. In an important study in the journal *Psychiatry* (Vol. 56, no.1) C.C. Bell and E.J. Jenkins found that 30 percent of elementary and middle school students had witnessed a stabbing and 26 percent had witnessed a shooting in a South Side Chicago community.

In many South and West Side schools, classroom teachers and administrators increasingly act as social workers that often work desperately to find scarce resources for their students, especially for those who have been subjected to or witnessed violence. Ironically, to find money for "safe passage workers" in the wake of school closings, CPS has cut money for counselors and social workers, [according to Reuters](#). The struggle to find resources to meet their student's needs fuels more and more hopelessness among teachers, especially when national and city wide policies insist on a "no-excuses" approach to ending the achievement gap for students who live in poverty, even as more and more support services are cut from budgets. Teachers feel as though they are asked to care less about their students' psychological needs and to focus exclusively on preparing them for standardized testing.

Though the PTSD diagnosis has been most commonly associated with victims or witnesses of assaults, Rosenbaum suggests that more and more teachers are being identified with PTSD symptoms due to the "*perception* of an increasingly hostile work environment. These teachers feel as though they are under assault. They feel as though they have been given an impossible job with virtually no hope of success."

He explains:

The system blames them for failure and administrators who are more loyal to the system than the school community often target teachers who ask for support with difficult students. Teachers in underserved communities burn out when they realize that giving 110 percent, sacrificing their personal lives, and spending their own funds on their classrooms will not lead to job security if their students' test scores don't increase. Asking for help is the worst thing they can do when neediness will attract more scrutiny from administrators who are looking for any reason to build a file on them. Experienced teachers who talk back tend to be targeted because CPS seems to value cheap over effective as money dries up.

Rosenbaum says that he and his colleagues have identified "a pattern of emotional distress" among clients who are CPS teachers who work in impoverished neighborhoods.

The most common diagnosis for these teachers, typically with between ten and twenty-two years of experience is Anxiety Disorder (300.02). These teachers have difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and they often have eating disorders.

Major Depressive Disorder (300.4) is becoming more frequently diagnosed. These teachers suffer difficulties with ability to concentrate, sleep, appetite, and feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Depression often paralyzes teachers who experience declining motivation and hopelessness. Rosenbaum suggests that these teachers typically have between 10 and 15 years of experience and feel trapped in teaching because their family situations require medical insurance and other career opportunities are nonexistent in the present economy.

Those who look for work in suburban districts are often disappointed because all school employers are looking for younger faculty who have potential. Experienced teachers who might receive offers, often face pay cuts based on the number of years of experience that the potential employer will accept. A teacher with 15 years experience might only get credit for 7 years in a new district.

A third diagnosis that alarms clinicians is the rapidly increasing numbers of inner-city CPS teachers who are identified as having PTSD (309.81). Many of these teachers have episodes of suicidal ideation. Some of these teachers have attempted suicide and make gestures to others to indicate that they are in serious trouble. These are typically senior teachers who have 25 years or more experience. They have typically witnessed several violent episodes or have histories of trauma. These teachers describe themselves as "totally burned out," according to Rosenbaum. They seem to have little hope of surviving in the profession long enough to qualify for a livable pension. In Chicago, this prospect dims as support within the city for fully funded teacher pensions declines. Rosenbaum and his colleagues treat this new epidemic of severe depression and PTSD with high doses of anti-depressants (SSRI).

Many of these teachers spend significant time under care in psychiatric hospitals, especially following suicide attempts. These teachers are often ineffective because of their mental health issues and are

often targeted for removal by building principals facing budget cuts. These administrators are pressured to care about test scores and they want to hire younger staff to raise test scores.

Although some principals seek to help teachers who are experiencing anxiety disorders, depression, and PTSD, most simply want to reassign teachers who complain or who "wear personal issues on their sleeves."

This institutional imperative becomes more troubling when we consider that CPS is one of the districts around the country that is closing public schools and opening private for profit charter schools.

A document that the [Washington Post published](#) in September (like above) indicates that Teach for America (TFA) teachers will have a significant role in staffing 52 new charter schools that will open in Chicago over the next five years.

CPS seems to be using school closings as a way to replace "ineffective" teachers-- who tend to be at the top end of the salary scale-- with recently graduated college students who receive five weeks of training during the summer before they begin teaching in schools in underserved communities. The push is for getting well- educated and idealistic young bodies into these new charter school classrooms.

The problem with this scenario is that TFA teachers typically spend no more than 2 to 3 years in the classroom and their training does not prepare them to be effective classroom teachers. Increasing numbers of TFA veterans are turning on the organization with [complaints of lack of support and inadequate preparation](#).

If we are facing "an epidemic" among CPS students and teachers and perhaps among veteran American public school teachers in general, the publics involved must begin to examine the causes of the crisis if the profession of teaching is to survive in underserved communities.

Rosenbaum and his colleagues are coming forward because public awareness is the first step toward providing teachers and students in underserved communities the support they need and deserve. Another member of the national board of CSWA, Another member of the CSWA board has contacted the leaders of both major teachers' unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Mr. Rosenbaum calls for social work and psychiatric professionals to join together to speak about these issues in meetings of concerned administrators, parents, teachers, and civic organizations. He also suggests that teachers who perceive a hostile working environment must document conversations and evidence and share their findings with their union representatives. Finally, he suggests that citizens, educational leaders, teachers, and policy leaders visit this [NEA website](#) as a necessary first step:

In the meantime, we all need to do what we can to explore ways to support students and teachers in underserved schools. NEA and AFT locals should adopt schools to plan a significant level of support for the faculty of these schools. We need to make this a priority.

In the long run, we need to reach foundations and grant writers to commission studies of these issues.

Clearly, doing nothing is not an option.

How can we better support students and educators who are suffering from the effects of violence and school instability?

Paul Horton has taught for thirty years in virtually every kind of school. He began his teaching career in a recently integrated rural Texas middle school. He then taught for five years in a large urban high school in San Antonio's West side where the majority of young people were ESL. He has been teaching at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, the country's most diverse independent school founded by John Dewey, for fourteen years.

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