# A Matter of Respect

Treating educators as the professionals they are is long overdue. School and district leaders can set the precedent.

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# CHALLENGE: There is a decline in (lack of) respect for public education.

"Teachers are the real heroes."

This was the sentiment I saw from parents and caregivers on social media when the pandemic stay-at-home orders began in spring 2020. Over those first few months, districts scrambled to find ways to support student learning amid collective trauma, pivoting to offer online instruction, distribute technology, and feed food-insecure families. As a university supervisor and professor myself, I was occupying multiple roles: teaching credential candidates and supporting student teachers online, *and* being at home with my two children. I remember thinking, *Maybe public education will finally get the respect it deserves.*

The "teachers as heroes" discourse, however, faded quickly. As districts felt pressure to move students back into physical school buildings, teachers were labeled seemingly ubiquitously as "selfish" for expressing concerns about the lack of health and safety protocols in place or "lazy" for struggling to provide quality hybrid instruction. In the 2022–23 academic year, with many public school districts facing consecutive years of declining enrollment (Jacobson, 2023), teachers became scapegoats for pandemic "learning loss." Their professionalism was undermined through book bans and increasing curricular oversight at the hands of school boards and state legislatures due to calls for restrictive changes from a minority of "local citizens" and advocacy groups (Meehan et al., 2023). All of these are signs of the decline in respect for public education.

## A Persistent Challenge

Many would argue that teaching has long been an underappreciated profession in the United States. It's not uncommon to hear dismissive comments from those not in the profession (sometimes even family and friends) who casually remark, "Teachers shouldn't complain. They only work 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and get summers off" or "Those who can't, teach." Gendered critiques of teaching as "women's work" and massive shortages of teachers of color are nothing new.

However, data from the last few years indicate that teacher disrespect is pushing a growing number of educators to the breaking point and causing them to leave the field altogether. In October 2022, I conducted an online survey of nearly 1,000 educators across 47 states to investigate the post-pandemic experiences of teachers (and former teachers). In response to a question about the challenging working conditions they experienced that, for some, had contributed to them leaving the profession, educators most commonly selected a "lack of respect for teachers" and the "competing demands placed upon teachers" (Hsieh, 2023). These outweighed other challenges like student behaviors, large class sizes, and lack of career advancement. My survey corroborates additional research (García, Kraft, & Schwartz, 2022) that shows teachers' sense of a greater decline in respect for their work and increasing demands on their time, emotional energy, and well-being (alongside no additional compensation) are leading to a teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

## A Lack of Support

Disrespect for teachers and public education in general takes many forms. Educators have noted experiencing:

- Online and in-person comments from students, parents, and those outside of teaching who question teachers' choices about curriculum and personal risk mitigation.
- A lack of administrative support for challenging classroom conditions.
- Failure of decisionmakers to recognize and listen to teacher expertise.
- Blame for student underachievement without recognition of the post-pandemic trauma students and teachers face.

In response to one of my tweets about the decline of respect for teaching, Erica Aguirre, a California high school teacher, pointed to the lack of systemic support:

> *Some of the disrespect is rooted in the privatization of education and excluding educators as experts in their own field. I'm with kids seven hours per day yet no one asks me (or teachers in general) about what kids need.*

Disrespect also shows up in underfunding of public education on national and state levels (Allegretto, García, & Weiss, 2022). Underfunding leads to lower salaries, which discourages teachers from entering into and staying in public schools. These retention issues create increasing burdens for those who do stay in public education.

## Making Way for More Respect

Having taken a mid-level administrative role in a higher education space last year, I am aware that often school and district administrators have less power to change policy than people might perceive. However, even with less direct power and influence than people think, and despite challenging barriers to changing educational policy, many school and district administrators, school board members, and education leaders are doing important work on multiple levels to address teacher working conditions, fair compensation, and teacher professionalism.

Here are three strategies school and district leaders can use to create more *humanizing* workplaces that respect educators' identities, perspectives, and professionalism. These strategies emerged from my research, conversations with educators, and the work of other education leaders.

### *1. Ask Questions and Listen*

As Ms. Aguirre noted, often teachers aren't asked about what students need, nor are they included in conversations about education on local, state, and national levels. She is not alone in her frustration. Helen Chan Hill, a California district administrator, gave a recent online presentation of her research at Pepperdine University on Mandarin dual-language immersion teachers' sense of belonging in her district and spoke of the connections between participants' working conditions and retention. Chan Hill noted that the teachers in her study overwhelmingly expressed a desire for district administrators to ask questions about teachers themselves, their classrooms, and their needs—and, subsequently, that they listen.

Even when these teachers were facing external challenges, positive interactions with school and district administrators, who referenced teachers' practice and pedagogy or remembered visits to their classroom, made a difference in their sense of belonging. Humanizing practices—such as taking a moment during a staff meeting to ask classroom teachers about their experiences and how leadership might support their work or highlighting a teacher's recent success—show respect for teachers who best know their own experiences. Teachers in Chan Hill's study mentioned that simple personal interactions, like a principal asking one teacher about their favorite Chinese music artist and playing that artist's song at the next staff meeting, made a difference.

In my own work with new teachers, they reported feeling most valued when administrators showed their respect by seeking teacher input *before* implementing changes that would impact them, advocating for compensation for additional duties, and inviting educators to shared decision-making at leadership meetings.

Education leaders can extend the practice of asking questions and listening beyond teachers to host student, family, and community listening sessions, perhaps in collaboration with parent-teacher organizations or in existing shared leadership structures (such as school site councils). Questions could be developed based on key forthcoming decisions that affect the school, community, or educators. Or they could be generated based on local (the school or larger community), state, or national education concerns. They could also be based on concerns or questions that teachers or parents themselves raise.

Sessions could be co-led by teachers and leaders or facilitated by an external facilitator. If public education's mission is to serve *all* families and communities, part of reclaiming respect is understanding the strengths and challenges of the communities that public schools serve. Having multilingual, accessible options for these listening sessions (including virtual options) or accommodating the session hours to a variety of family schedules allows public schools to be (and hopefully to be seen as) inclusive communities that are learning from all stakeholders.

Once school and district administrators know what is really going on in their schools, they will be better prepared to take supportive and responsive action. Improving teachers' working conditions and showing respect for their successes and challenges models respect for teachers at a foundational level. These bidirectional opportunities for engagement can build belonging and respect for public education among and across all constituencies.

### *2. Develop and Support Teacher Expertise*

Another way to increase respect for public education and teachers is to invest in developing and supporting teacher expertise throughout teachers' careers. This can begin when districts develop strong partnerships with local teacher-preparation programs that provide robust education alongside clinical placements that support new teacher development. Program and school leaders can ensure cohesion between university and school-based settings by investing in training and support for mentor teachers and understanding initiatives and curriculum across both contexts. Regular meetings between district leaders responsible for induction and teacher-prep faculty allow for collaboration on initiatives and shared priorities for teacher growth.

Initiatives might include working with other faculty across disciplines or school sites, creating a classroom learning community, or hosting a workshop featuring induction mentors, teacher-prep faculty, or veteran teachers demonstrating lessons or sharing their experiences on topics.

One example can be seen in a working group co-led by Karen Escalante, assistant professor at California State University, San Bernardino, and Melissa Meetze-Hall, an administrator with the Riverside County Office of Education. This regional collaborative meets quarterly around shared areas of professional learning, new state initiatives, and opportunities for further collaboration. Examples of recent meeting topics include the integration of California's new literacy and teaching professional standards and exploring funding opportunities for teacher development.

Once teachers enter the field, strong induction programs and opportunities for ongoing professional development, including district-supported participation in professional organizations and choice-based learning workshops, can help bolster public school teaching as a profession, and teachers as professionals. Teachers' involvement in local, state, or national professional organizations can help them connect with colleagues, near and far, who are committed to ongoing professional learning. Administrators must recognize the importance of ongoing investment in teachers' professional growth, encouraging (and funding) them to be involved in and attend conferences that support their practice, pedagogy, and professional communities and inviting them to share in their departments or with the whole faculty about their learning.

In my own professional life, involvement in organizations like the Bay Area Writing Project and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have helped me feel connected to teachers and teaching, and to grow in my own practice even as my role has shifted over time. I currently cofacilitate the Asian/Asian American Caucus of NCTE, which has fostered a space of belonging among preK–20 Asian American English teachers, many of whom feel isolated as the only or one of a few Asian American teachers at their site.

If professional learning budgets are tight, consider redistributing spending to allow interested faculty to attend choice-based professional learning that supports their growth goals and can be shared with your site team, instead of whole-faculty trainings where one "size" may not fit all. Investing consistently in personally meaningful, professional communities that foster teacher development demonstrates that public education is worth investing in and contributes to the greater public good.

### *3. Advocate Publicly*

Finally, education leaders must be advocates for public education. To do this, they can challenge deficit perspectives by providing examples that reframe discourses of pandemic-era "learning loss" (such as discussing innovative pivots by schools and districts; highlighting non-tested skills and knowledge students acquired; and noting the importance of investment in social-emotional connection and safety to enhance learning). Administrators should particularly highlight teachers and students from traditionally marginalized communities who are generally spoken about as being "at risk" instead of as whole people capable of greatness. Emphasize public education as something that benefits all of society, not just the children and families that public schools serve.

Principals and district leaders must also advocate for classroom teachers and school librarians to be able to make professional decisions, including those surrounding curriculum—and support them when they choose inclusive materials. Current movements for curricular censorship are primarily coming from "a vocal minority" of advocacy groups who are seeking to restrict teaching about topics they deem controversial and uncomfortable and to ban books, particularly targeting authors and characters that represent communities of color and the LGBTQ+ community (Meehan et al., 2023). These bans from school boards and other local and state policymakers show blatant disrespect for the professionalism of public educators and limit opportunities for students to see authentic, diverse representations (particularly of people and characters from marginalized communities) and develop critical perspectives. School and district leaders must fight for greater respect and curricular autonomy for teachers.

Perhaps most essentially, education leaders must advocate for more equitable funding formulas and greater financial investments in public education. As Sylvia Allegretto (2022) and her colleagues at the Economic Policy Institute highlight in a report, increased federal funding for education is necessary to support more equitable public schools by mitigating gaps in local and state funding and ensuring more equitable living wages for teachers and an investment in student learning. More federal funding is particularly important for schools that serve low-income communities, given that school funding formulas are often based on local property taxes, bond measures, and donations. School and district leaders must advocate to school boards for increased local funding and advocate on state and federal levels as well.

## A More Just Future

In the end, early slogans about teachers being the real heroes were right. But more than heroes, teachers are professionals who deserve to be treated in ways that reflect their valuable contributions. School and district leaders have key roles to play as learners, listeners, supporters, and advocates in promoting greater respect for teachers. But they are not alone. Investing in and showing respect for teachers and the work they do is something *each of us* can play a part in, regardless of our role. Quality public education as a right for all children and families is an essential part of the bedrock of democracy. We must fight for the funding and respect that our public schools, educators, families, students, and communities deserve. Our nation's future depends on it.

*Author's note:* The author would like to acknowledge the educators who contributed to this piece, including those who responded to the initial survey and those whose ideas were not cited here.

**Reflect & Discuss**

➛ What routines, resources, and practices in the workplace help you to feel most respected as a professional?

➛ For school leaders, think about the concrete ways you provide autonomy and respect to the educators in your building. What's working well? Where might you improve?