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Reducing Teacher Workloads

15–19 minutes

CHALLENGE: Teachers have too much on their plates.

Imagine listing out all the house projects you want to accomplish in the next year: The room to paint. The garden to weed. The closet to organize. The list could be infinite. Now, let's say you can only accomplish 12 percent of these projects. How would you approach the list differently? There are nonessential things you'd ignore entirely. Other things you would scrap because doing them partially would be silly (e.g., you wouldn't paint only 12 percent of a room). You'd have no choice but to narrow your infinite goals due to finite time and energy.

Here's a reality check: Students, on average, spend 12 percent of their lives each year in schools. Despite the infinite number of things teachers and administrators want to accomplish with their students, our time with them is finite. Yet, we're under external pressures to function as if we can do it all: Implementing dozens of new initiatives each year; aiming for exponential growth in every substrand of hundreds of testing standards; giving detailed feedback on every prompt, problem, and paper we pass out to students.

As teachers and school leaders, we also place pressures on each other and ourselves, often trying to be every student's teacher, counselor, mentor, life coach, and savior. The pressure of this workload, left unchecked and without structures to support it, will continue to build, stretching and bursting our school systems at the seams.

When faced with the reality of our limited time and energy, we can either bemoan our finitude, or we can empower ourselves with two critical ideas:

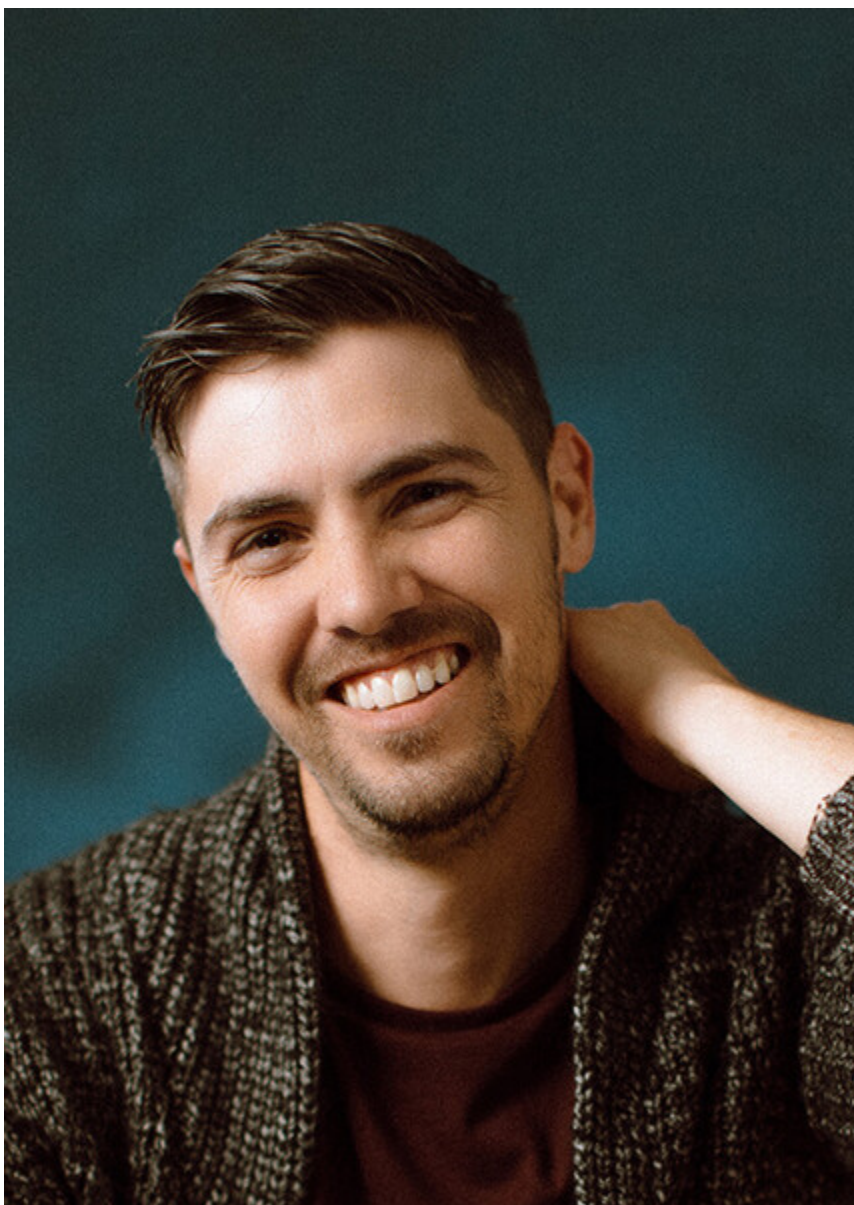
1. Considering how little time we have with students, it is *remarkable* how much we impact their lives and learning each year.
2. When we accept our limitations of time, we grant ourselves permission to do a few things well, rather than all the things poorly.

When we accept our limitations, we're on our way toward adopting a mindset of *radical acceptance of finitude*: A practice of rejecting the many distractions and pressures surrounding education, protecting our own and one another's time, and prioritizing a few things we want to do exceptionally well. By replacing the idea that we contain "infinite potential" with the reality that our time and energy are finite, we can create healthier workloads and ultimately more successful schools.

Eschew Infinity and Beyond

Let's take a closer look at teachers' workloads, in particular: The median weekly number of hours a teacher works in the United States is 54 (Kurtz, 2022). A Swedish study found that people who work 10 hours or more of overtime a week had *twice* the levels of cortisol in their system compared to those who worked a typical 40-hour week (Moss, 2021). These statistics should shock us all into reassessing how we spend our time: The typical U.S. educator may have double the stress levels they would if they had a true 40-hour per week schedule.

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Moreover, teachers' additional hours aren't always a deposit into the success of a school. These workloads are borrowed investments with high interest rates—taxing an educator's energy levels without translating to higher student performance. Students suffer when teachers are overworked. As one example, a study involving 380 teachers and 7,899 students determined that teacher exhaustion not only negatively affected standardized test scores but also diminished class grades, school satisfaction, and perception of teacher support (Arens & Morin, 2016). Students with exhausted teachers are also significantly more likely to get referrals and in-school suspensions (Eddy et al., 2020).

In attempting to "do it all," educators and school leaders wreck our own emotional well-being, impair the learning experience of students, and achieve less. It is only in embracing our limitations—of time, energy, staffing, funding, and focus—that we can ensure the 12 percent of time students spend in schools is of the highest quality. To do so, there are agreements that teachers can make *individually*, and school leaders can ensure *collectively*.

Working Smarter, Not Harder

Let's further scrutinize teachers' workloads and see where we can work smarter, not harder: Of the hours spent in a typical work week, the median amount of time actually teaching is only 25 hours, according to a 2022 Merrimack College Teacher Survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center (Kurtz). *Teaching* is not the source of excessive workloads. It's the secondary and tertiary responsibilities that put pressure on educators' schedules, including:

- Grading/feedback (3–5 hours).
- Planning/prepping lessons (5–6 hours).
- PD and meeting with colleagues (2–3 hours).
- Administrative, school committees, and extra duty tasks (5–6 hours).

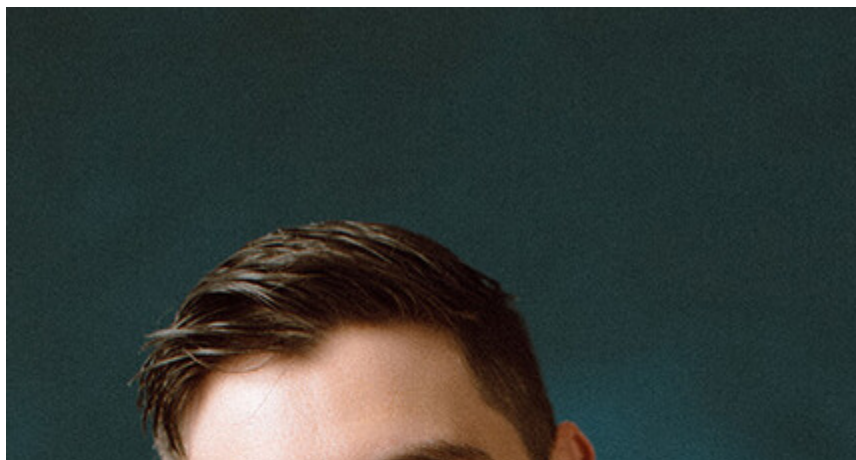
At the individual and organizational levels, we can view these secondary and tertiary responsibilities as *opportunities* to reduce our workloads. For example, a United Kingdom study tested a variety of practices to reduce workload while increasing educator agency and well-being—all while tracking the performance of nearly 11,000 students (Churches, 2020). With the support of their administration, teachers tested strategies such as:

- Implementing more efficient and less time-consuming feedback practices.
- Reducing the frequency of data collection and data meetings.
- Simplifying lesson planning processes and requirements.

These interventions reduced the average additional teacher work time (the time beyond their contractual hours) from 1 hour and 20 minutes extra per day to 30 minutes extra a day. Further, researchers found that reducing workload consistently boosted teacher well-being by decreasing feelings of workaholicism and increasing self-efficacy, optimism, love of learning, and enthusiasm.

And here's the kicker: Reducing the workload had no effect or a *positive* effect on student performance. That means, at worst, decreasing teacher workloads had zero effect on student achievement. At best, students actually *improved* their performance as they experienced more specific, immediate feedback; more time learning as opposed to progress monitoring tests; and less stressed and overworked teachers. So it's not a question of whether we *can* reduce workloads for the sake of teacher well-being—it's a question of whether we *will* reduce workloads for the sake of student learning.

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Of course, radical acceptance of finitude is not as easy as saying "screw it, let's work less." But there are concrete solutions teachers can adopt individually and school leaders can ensure organizationally that can have a major impact on the success and well-being of educators and the students they serve.

Here are three "Agreements for Radical Acceptance of Finitude" that every educator and school leader should make:

Agreement #1: We Will Elicit Feedback and Ensure Follow-Through

School leaders should begin their efforts to create conditions for more manageable workloads by listening to staff: Where are teachers feeling overwhelmed, what do they need, and how can leaders respond to those needs? In a 2021 *Harvard Business Review* article, Jennifer Moss recommends leaders ask: "What is one change that would instantly allow you to be healthier at work?"

This question elicits qualitative feedback that can be immediately actionable for a school leader. For example, one district I worked with found a trend in answers to this question. One of the most cited requests was to not be asked to sub during planning periods—a domino-effect factor that led to greater exhaustion. Rather than just a vague data point on how overworked their teachers were, the district gained insight into a specific cause of overwork that could be addressed by boosting sub pay in the district, hiring more building subs, and ensuring teachers could do their planning during their planning time.

Solutions might require creativity—and putting our money where our motivation is—but we have to view our teachers as the foundation of a successful school. Overload the foundation without systems to support it, and the whole thing crumbles.

Agreement #2: We Will Reduce Initiative Fatigue

Every school leader should be asking, "Are we doing too many things with mediocrity rather than a few things with mastery?" In *Leading with Focus*, Mike Schmoker writes that "effective leaders protect their teachers from an unfocused array of professional development offerings" (2016).

One district I worked with identified more than 40 initiatives they had started in the past few years for a staff of 150 teachers. Numbers are relative, and although some of these initiatives were minor, others involved hours,

weeks, or years of full implementation—including curriculum sets, PD days, and numerous meetings.

Initiative fatigue affects all three dimensions of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2000):

- It increases *exhaustion* as staff juggle dozens of different asks and changes.
- It creates *cynicism* as individuals lose faith and trust that an initiative will actually be supported with time and integrity.
- It causes *inefficacy* as teachers face new learning curves, often without the coaching and support necessary to develop skills before the next new initiative comes their way.

One strategy for embracing teachers' finitude is to establish a zero-sum rule: Before implementing a new idea, do a realistic assessment of (1) how much time it will take to learn or enact, (2) where this time is going to be freed up from existing tasks, and (3) how this shift will be clearly communicated to staff.

School leaders might ask staff questions like:

- What is one initiative that, if it were off your plate, would help you do your job better?
- What elements of [the proposed initiative] should we keep that allow us to [goal of the initiative]?
- Are there elements of [the proposed initiative] that we should scrap while still being able to achieve [goal of the initiative]?
- Are there things we're doing now that already contribute to [goal of the initiative]?

Based on the feedback received, school leaders should consider how to be more efficient with their staff's contractual time by funding, coaching, and supporting a few things with mastery rather than attempting all things with mediocrity. Choose which initiatives matter most, communicate that clearly to staff, and resist the temptation to change for the sake of change.

Agreement #3: We Will Work Smarter, Not Harder

Whether you are an individual trying to manage your own workload or in a position to influence your organization's policies, focus on being incrementally more efficient *with your existing workloads*. Look for your biggest time sucks and ask yourself, What can I do to reduce this workload by 20 percent (or even just 10 percent)? How can we make our data meetings 20 percent more efficient? How can I spend 30 minutes less on grading this week? How can I spend 30 seconds less per email?

Intentionally seeking efficiency doesn't *guarantee* you'll reduce time spent inefficiently, but in seeking out and experimenting with new approaches, you'll be pushed to analyze your existing habits, identify inefficiencies, and generate novel ideas.

Here are some examples that have served me well as an educator:

- Implementing single-point rubrics and pre-conferencing with students in class rather than spending my nights writing detailed feedback on big projects and essays.
- Creating a bank of email templates that I can copy and paste for common emails (parent communication, student feedback).
- Including commonly requested links or information in my email footer/signature.
- Maintaining a Google Doc of activities and prompts that I can easily pull for warm-ups and exit tickets.

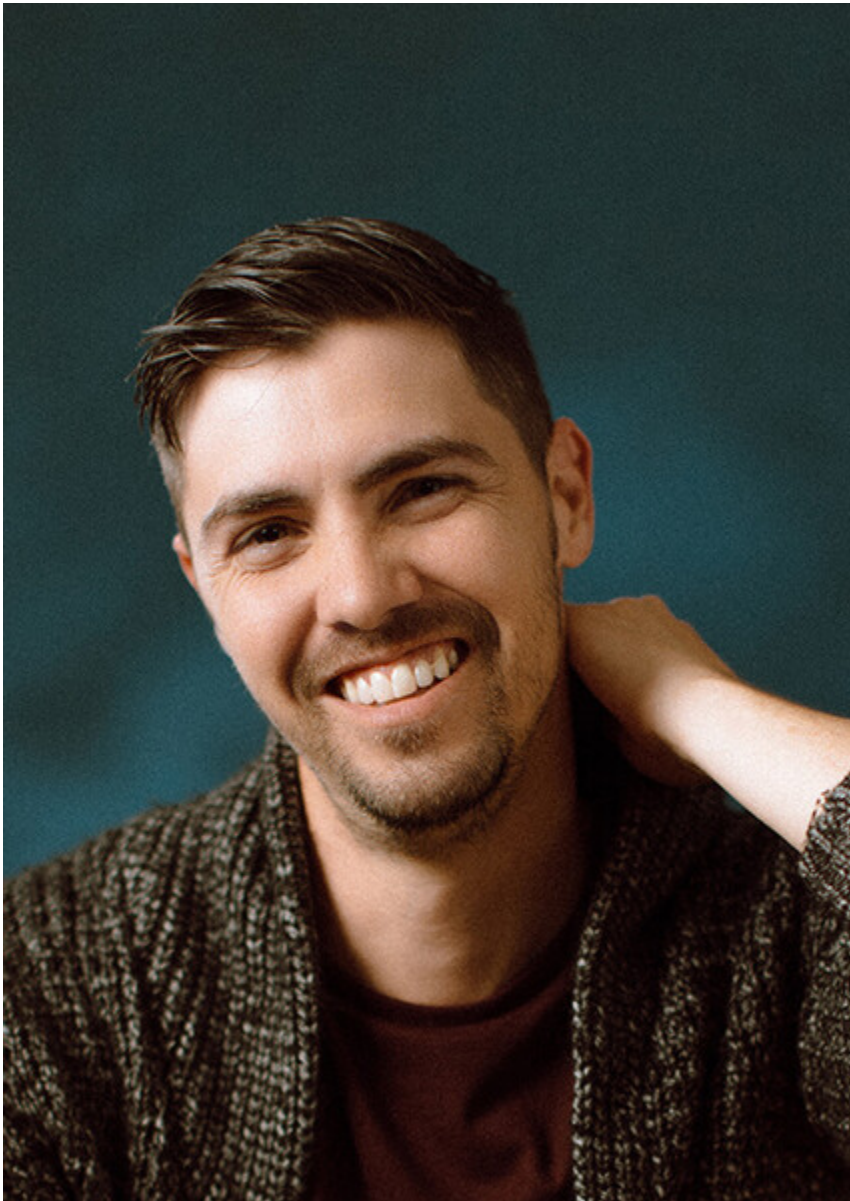
When we prime our brains to prioritize our time, we create methods for working smarter, not harder.

Step Away from the Buffet

Let's revisit those to-dos—for house projects or student progress—and break them into three lists:

- *Nail List*: What few things do I want to dedicate the majority of my energy toward? What systems, support, and boundaries will I create and communicate to nail these things?
- *Prevail List*: Where do I give myself permission to maintain the status quo? How will I avoid the temptation to try to do all the things that demand my attention?
- *Fail List*: What things do I accept I won't be able to accomplish right now, or this month, or this year? How will I accept the limitations of my time and forgive myself accordingly?

Schools can't do it all—but we can make a positive impact when we teach, lead, and live within our boundaries.



For too long, we've habituated to the false optimism of infinite possibilities. We are pressured, enticed, and conditioned to think that, if we just put in more time or work harder or find the perfect time management system, then we'll be able to accomplish our endless list of initiatives and goals. We bring this culture into our schools, thinking that, with enough passion, willpower, and PD, teachers can fix all of the challenges facing current and

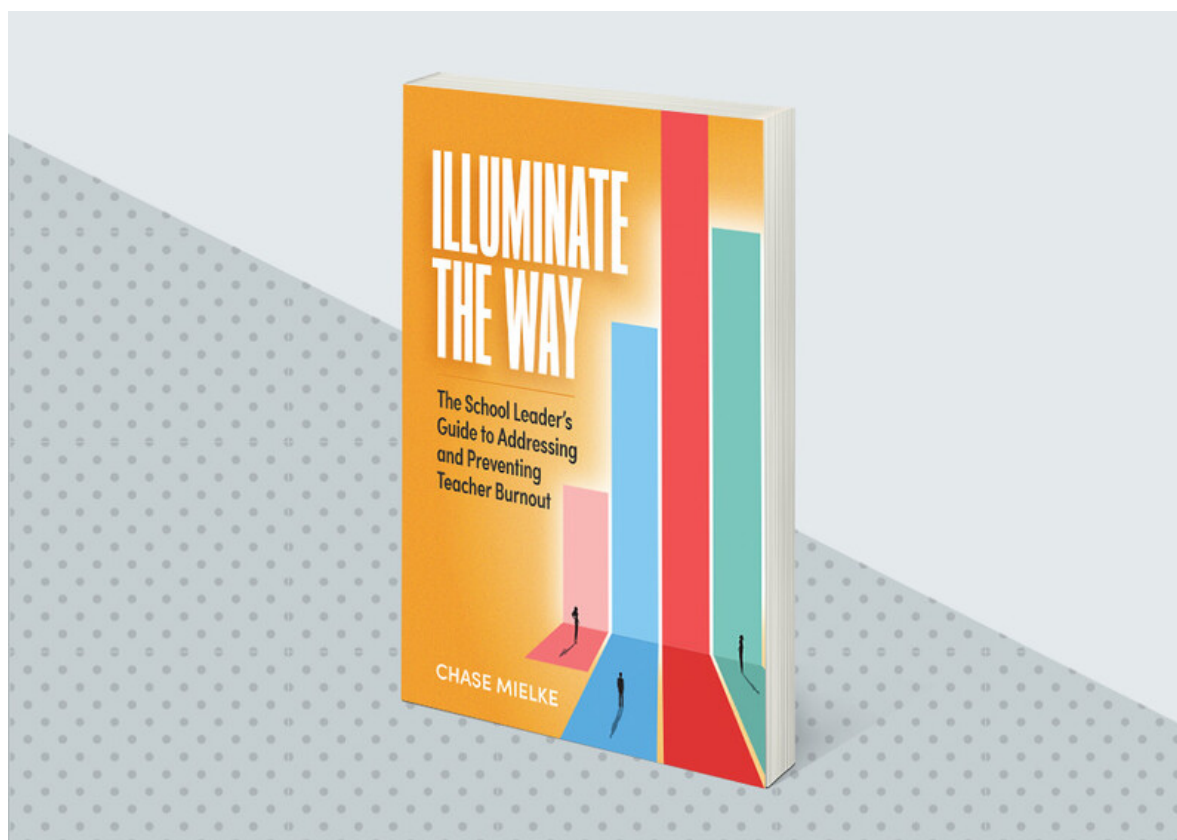
future generations. Schools can't do it all—but we can make a positive impact when we teach, lead, and live within our boundaries. Let's put "Reduce Teacher Workload" at the top of our to-do list.

Reflect & Discuss

- How can principals better elicit and respond to feedback from overloaded teachers?
- What's the first step your school would need to take to commit to the three "Agreements for Radical Acceptance of Finitude" described here?
- What is one daily practice you could undertake to become more efficient within your existing workload?

Illuminate the Way

A guide for school leaders to address and prevent teacher burnout.



Simplifying Schools

What if school staffs intentionally sought to reduce their workloads? That's the question explored in "Subtraction in Action," a series of episodes from MIT's TeachLab podcast, which explores innovative teaching practices, research, and insights from leading educators and experts in the field. "People are too worn down and too busy already to add new things," says host Justin Reich, an MIT-based education researcher and regular contributor to EL. "Another approach is to start with subtraction: How can we make schools simpler?"

One way, says Brown University professor Matt Kraft, is to maximize instructional time by minimizing interruptions. In an interview with Reich, Kraft draws on [a 2022 study](#) he conducted with a colleague, noting that even seconds-long interruptions—like an intercom announcement—create a "spillover effect" that disrupts the flow of learning and "requires a lot of extra work to get people back to where they were." In a case study of Providence Public School District in Rhode Island, Kraft found that the "spillover" from seemingly minor interruptions added up to a staggering loss of "20 days of potential instructional time" per year at some schools in the district.

What can school leaders do to cut down on interruptions? Strategically subtract. "Schools and principals have agency over this," says Kraft. Administrators'

logistical decisions, like creating “a one-time blast to teachers in the morning with everything wrapped up via a text or via a single announcement,” can play a significant role in supporting “a norm or commitment or a culture to hold instructional time sacred.”

When it comes to reducing what’s on teachers’ plates, small subtractions add up. “Each little subtraction,” says Reich, “can make people feel a little lighter and breathe a little easier. And then we can figure out what schools are missing and what to strategically add to make them stronger.” Listen to all episodes of the “Subtraction in Action” series at: www.teachlabpodcast.com.

—*Jessica Comola*