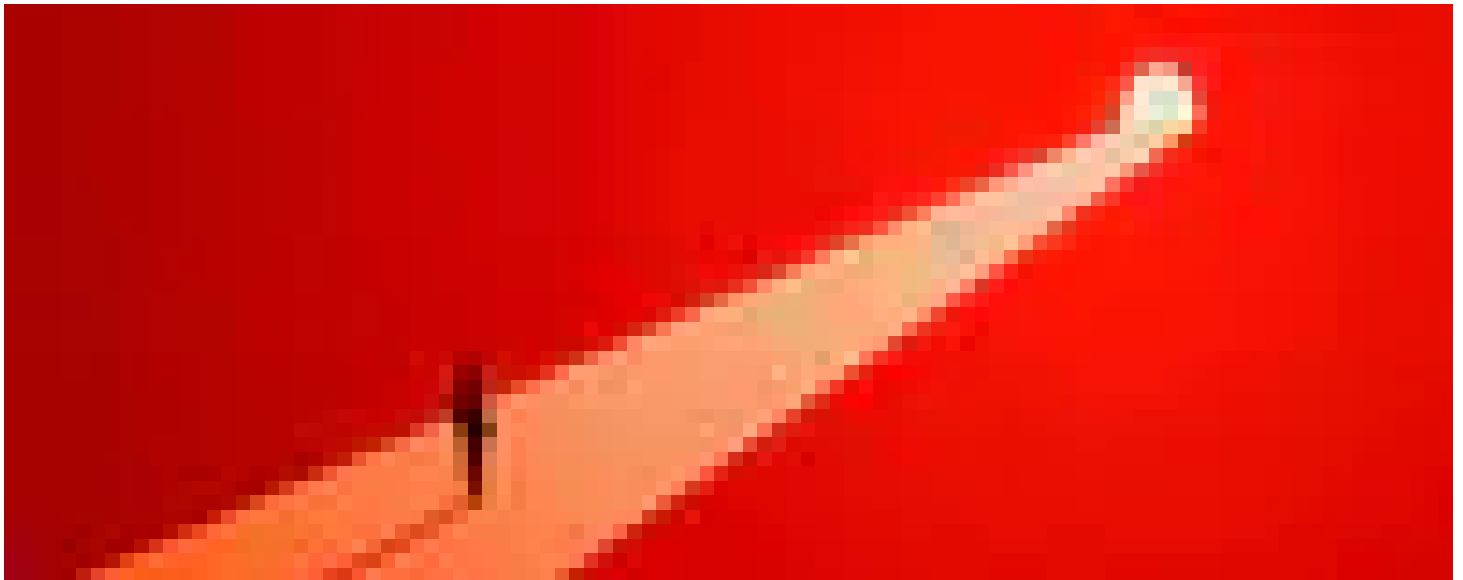


Teachers Have Reached a Breaking Point. But Remedies Do Exist.

By Stephen Noonoo

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Burned out, tired, demoralized, at a breaking point. Spend time with teachers these days, and phrases such as these will come up often. It's not a new narrative, but it's certainly an accurate one for many, as the pandemic continues to radically reshape the education landscape.

Earlier this year, a RAND Corp. [survey](#) of former teachers found that stress was the most common reason for leaving the profession. Another [survey](#) found that nearly all teachers agreed that teaching is more stressful now than before the pandemic. Three-quarters of National Board Certified Teachers [are working](#) at least 20 percent more since the start of the pandemic. And teachers of color continue to [face](#) a unique form of stress due to institutionalized racism.

“It’s a different job,” says Chanea Bond, a public high school English teacher in Fort Worth, Texas, about pandemic teaching. “There’s no amount of sleep that gets me

caught up with the exhaustion. It is a physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion.”

At this point, some wonder, is there even anything school administrators can do to help teachers?

Several things, actually, according to a [new evidence-based research brief](#) focused on improving teacher wellbeing put out by EdResearch for Recovery, a project from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University and Results for America, a nonprofit that connects policymakers and local governments with research-backed strategies.

Some remedies are self-evident, if difficult to implement quickly. Building a culture of mutual trust between teachers and administrators can improve relationships and even happiness. And schools that commit to achieving racial and social justice see less turnover and dissatisfaction from educators of color.

Others simply require flexible and willing school leaders. Asking teachers to help design professional development opportunities can boost morale. Likewise, giving teachers a break from administrative paperwork and supporting them when it comes to classroom management can improve teacher satisfaction.

“There’s a new kind of urgency for school leaders to meet the intellectual, the social, the emotional and the ethical needs of their teachers right now—so they will stay put,” says co-author Doris Santoro, a professor of education at Bowdoin College and author of the teacher-centered book [“Demoralized.”](#)

The brief lists other strategies too, such as the usefulness of collecting data on teacher concerns and how trauma-informed practices can reduce stress. But the goal is really about encouraging a spirit of collaboration between teachers and administrators.

“To me, it’s so much about the process and the structures by which we operate and less about the actual strategies,” says co-author Olga Price, an associate professor at the George Washington University and director of its Center for Health and Health Care in Schools. “I think a lot of really innovative, impactful strategies emerge when you bring

people together who care about the issues. And who’s going to care more about educator wellbeing than educators?”

That’s not to say the strategies are arbitrary. They’re intentionally tied to robust research and were chosen because they largely focus on communication and collaboration and thus don’t require much extra funding to implement.

One [Annenberg paper](#) from last year, which is cited in the brief, surveyed nearly 8,000 teachers and found that the most successful teachers were the ones who could depend on their school leaders for strong communication, fair expectations and targeted professional development.

Ideally, pointing directly to evidence will make it easier for teachers and administrators to reach consensus about what works—and to sell the idea to families and district leaders.

“I think that there are plenty of leaders out there who have wanted to implement some of these strategies but have met resistance,” Santoro says. “For someone who says, ‘Why bother doing that, what’s the use of it?’ We have evidence here—and oodles of it—just a click away.”

But there are still pervasive challenges. Before the pandemic, Bond, the Texas teacher, was given extra time to plan lessons with her department. Lately, there hasn’t been time due to a substitute teacher shortage and a raft of new responsibilities around students’ mental health and social-emotional wellbeing. Still, something as simple as an administrator taking over a class so she can catch up on other work from time to time can be a big help. “We’re being asked to make time without being given any,” she says.

One point that did not end up making the brief, but just as easily might have, is that teachers are hurting and need space to grieve. In the past year-and-a-half, teachers have lost a lot, Santoro explains. They’ve had to deal with the losses of loved ones, time with their students and the familiar notion of what teaching is.

Bond says her school is still grieving the death of a colleague and several members of her community. The push to move on like nothing happened feels heavy to her.

“We’ve got people crying in their rooms and in the hallways,” she says. “My colleagues are different than they were before the pandemic. I mean, we are shaken.”

A simple acknowledgment of that reality—and some space to work through the emotions that come with it—would go a long way, she says.

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