



ADDRESS THE STRESS

HOW LEADERS CAN SUPPORT TEACHERS
IN AN EXTRAORDINARY YEAR

BY SHARRON HELMKE

It's the start of another school year, but unlike any other in our careers. This year, we find ourselves at the nexus of a widespread, months-old pandemic and racial trauma that is centuries old.

We cannot pretend this is an

ordinary school year. For many of us, there is fear in our classrooms, fear in the streets, fear of being in crowds, and fear for our families, to name just a few of our concerns.

This layering of health stress that started months ago with the racial

trauma that has gone on for generations is not something we can check at the door as we enter school. With no immediate end to either in sight, these crises and the resulting trauma will be with us throughout the foreseeable future.

Leaders must model how to respect and care for colleagues

Despite this trauma and the uncertainty of resolution, we're being asked to step into the actual or virtual classroom, greet our students, and make learning happen. Given this is the reality we face and that taking the year off is not an option for many of us, how do we care for ourselves, our colleagues, and our staffs?

The strategies we should use now are not inherently different than those we would use in any school year. The difference is in being more aware of their importance and more intentional about doing and following through with them. Like so much in education, it starts with leaders setting the stage for this new emphasis and modeling it in practice.

GO BEYOND NORMAL EFFORTS

Leaders must model how to respect and care for colleagues. They must go beyond their normal efforts to show respect for their staffs to avoid giving the impression that teachers' presence is taken for granted (Porter, 2020). We must realize teachers are, rightfully, sensitive to the implication that stepping up to teach in the middle of a widespread pandemic without clear safety plans is what they are paid to do.

Many teachers have long felt undervalued by the larger society, and, for many, that feeling has been exacerbated by demands for in-person instruction without provision of adequate personal protective equipment or clarification of safety

plans (Pawlewicz, 2020). Writing for *The New York Times*, Dana Goldstein and Eliza Shapiro (2020) report that teachers feel the decision to reopen schools "elevates the needs of the economy and working parents above the concerns of the classroom workforce."

Teachers need to know that district and campus leaders understand their concerns and value their personal safety, and that of their families, as much as their ability to successfully manage in-person and virtual classrooms.

Campus leaders can also focus on improving communication and making themselves available to hear teacher concerns. Shutting out the concerns or asking teachers to "focus on the work" or "set aside your concerns for the students" isn't possible when the stress and trauma are pervasive and when the work environment itself is a source of that stress (Cuncic, 2020).

Leaders show respect by listening deeply to their faculty and using all their available resources and influence within the larger community to advocate for teachers' most urgent requests and concerns. While it's unlikely teachers will ever really feel safe with so many uncertainties, showing that you hear them, value them, and care about them as more than employees is a demonstration of respect. Expending your time and effort to listen and act on their concerns shows care and creates solidarity.

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

It's also important for leaders and teachers to keep in mind that research has demonstrated that extreme stress hinders the ability to concentrate, remember, and think logically. You may find that faculty members whom you once thought of as your most creative are suddenly uninspired, while your most reliable are struggling to meet deadlines and meet expectations.

It might be tempting to counsel them to focus and get more organized or to make an emotional appeal about how much you count on them, but they cannot give what their stress-compromised systems cannot make happen (Cuncic, 2020; business.com, 2020).

Instead, leaders would be wise to critically examine every "ask" they make of their teachers: Is this truly essential to the heart of what needs to be done now, in this larger context? While it might be tempting to want your campus community to shine during these crises by going above and beyond, it's important to understand that, while your faculty might aspire to do so, emotional and physical resources for making it a reality are limited by factors outside of their control (Porter, 2020).

In addition to managing our expectations, it is also necessary to increase our support for the challenges teachers face — for example, the technical aspects of teaching during a pandemic, the academic aspects of

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addressing the curriculum compromises of last spring, and the emotional trauma of living in the midst of multiple crises.

Teachers can benefit from increased access to instructional coaches, technology specialists, counselors, mental health providers, curriculum specialists, and other support resources, but it's equally important that teachers are not made to feel that using these resources is one more "must do" on their list. Instead, make clear what these support staff members can offer teachers and how they might be useful. Ensure teachers know who is available to them, what issues they can help with, and how to contact them as needed.

Equally important is assurance that accessing these resources will remain confidential and that support staff respond quickly since a delayed response will only contribute to the mounting stress (Teachers Thematic Group, 2020; National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

Supporting individuals in caring for themselves is yet another strategy of respect and compassion (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). Like the community strategies discussed above, the tips for individuals are nothing new. It's the intentionality and follow-through that are key. Leaders can not only give permission to do these things throughout the workday, they can make time and space for them, and actively encourage their use.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Experts recommend that individuals understand how their bodies and minds hold stress and how to release it (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020; business.com, 2020). Movement, such as walking, stretching, dancing, or running can burn off the stress-generated energy and tightness stored in our muscles (Connley, 2020).

Open expression creative outlets, from coloring books to adult maker spaces, can provide outlets for others, but in busy stressful times, these activities might be viewed as extras, or

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even dismissed as frivolous. Making time and space available for physical, emotional, and creativity breaks throughout the day, while maintaining appropriate social distance, can encourage people to take self-care more seriously.

Emotional stress can be diffused by talking, but only with someone who has shown he or she can hold space for the full range of one's emotions without trying to fix or change them and without trying to change the speaker's opinion or minimize the response (Plett, 2019). In some cases, this might be a professional. In other cases, it's a trusted friend.

What's important is to recognize that the safe and timely release of pent-up thoughts and emotions is critical. Do your teachers have a way to excuse themselves and a place to go when the emotional stress threatens to overwhelm them? Does doing so stigmatize them?

Many organizations focused on mental health are advocating that schools assign on-site counselors or other mental health professionals to small groups of teachers to allow relationships to grow so that these professionals can recognize and quickly respond to signs of building stress and trauma (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020; Teachers Thematic Group, 2020).

And while it isn't possible to step through the campus door and pretend that the outside world just ceased to exist, it is possible to use our passion for education, the friendship of colleagues, and the beauty of nature to experience small doses of happiness that can help

fill our emotional cups and boost our physical immunity.

Psychologist and author Rick Hanson notes, "The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones" (Hanson, 2020). Human minds have an evolutionary and protectionist bias toward dwelling on and remembering what feels unsafe or affects us negatively.

Under no circumstances would we want to discount this protective measure, but during crises this biological mechanism can go into overdrive and all we take in are the stressful events of our day and the evening news.

To counter this, we must be encouraged to intentionally notice and dwell with the good that presents itself to us — a kind word, a smile, the song of a bird, a student's light-bulb moment — and allow ourselves to feel gratitude for these moments (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020).

To notice these things is in no way denying that there are real dangers in the world; instead, it's working to draw on the good to feed ourselves. Periodically throughout the day, or at day's end, we can remind ourselves and our colleagues to take a moment to reflect and note moments in which we experienced a big or small "good thing."

These moments help us to remember that life can be good even when trauma is present. Noting these good moments is not a betrayal of reality. It's more like offering ourselves an emotional life ring amidst a sea of reality (Hanson, 2020).

MODEL CARING COMMUNITIES

Individually and collectively, we may feel that we're fighting to return to normal, or we may be fighting for change, but fall has brought the return of school, and no one is standing still.

We were called by our communities to find a way to make school happen, and we call to each other to reach out in crises and model what caring communities look and sound like when they value and care for each other.

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