



Wellness is bigger than any one activity or action. The cursory teacher appreciation week is not enough to address the need to build essential practices for sustained wellness.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

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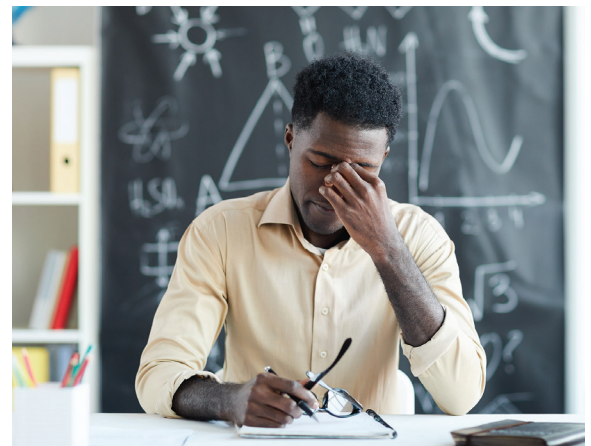
TEACHER BURNOUT IS REAL, BUT THERE ARE SOLUTIONS

“How are the children?” is a question the Maasai people of East Africa ask in traditional salutation. The expected reply is, “All of the children are well.” The understanding is that if the community is peaceful and well, it will manifest as the children being valued, cared for, and thriving (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; O’Neill, 2015).

Similarly, when schools are working well, their success is reflected in thriving children.

Schools that set a goal of thriving aim to create a school culture “where all students benefit from a culture of belonging, while also providing engaging, well-rounded educational experiences that reflect who they are and are relevant to the world around them” (Nashville Public Education Foundation, n.d).

This type of school culture will only be created if the teachers also feel like they are valued and cared for by the school and district leadership, their colleagues, parents, and the community. A teacher’s sense of support and well-being affects their ability to teach effectively (Kush et al., 2022).



Unfortunately, we cannot universally say that all of the children are well in our schools, and that is in part because educators are not well. School communities are struggling. Educators are struggling. A recent Gallup poll found that 52% of K-12 teachers are burned out — the highest burnout rate of all U.S. professions surveyed (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Burnout results from perceived feelings of loss of control and workload in an environment where there is a perception of lack of fairness, value, or recognition. Recent conversations I’ve had with school, district, and organizational leaders all center on a common theme: Educators at all levels within the system are stressed, and there is not an easy, one-answer-fits-all fix.

This is why Learning Forward has created a space in all of the 2023 issues of *The Learning Professional* to explore educator wellness. To kick off this column, I want to be clear about what true wellness is — and isn’t — because there are many misconceptions. Wellness is bigger than any one activity or action. For example, the cursory teacher appreciation week is not enough to address the need to build essential practices for sustained wellness.

As a researcher who focuses on educator wellness, I focus on eight key areas: physical, emotional, social, environmental, intellectual, financial, spiritual, and occupational wellness. I share strategies of support for sustained wellness within each of the eight key areas and coach educators on how to build resilience when times are challenging. Here are two strategies I recommend that cross multiple areas of wellness.

I usually start by asking educators when and how often they take a break. Science suggests that we need 10 hours of rest per day, and it’s important to note that rest does not necessarily mean sleep. Participating in an enjoyable hobby, reading a book for pleasure, or partaking in physical activity regularly can all be restful if they are enjoyable. Taking a break improves job performance and reduces job stress. Just a few five-minute breaks scattered throughout the day

can help strengthen mental focus and clarity. I encourage educators to stretch, chat with a colleague, walk through the halls for a few minutes, or even simply take some deep breaths.

In a recent webinar I attended, an instructor described how she begins each of her classes with a minute of silent breathing, which allows students to recenter and be more present as they focus. Learning to Breathe is a research-based mindfulness curriculum for adolescents that has been adopted by school districts across the nation (learning2breathe.org/) and is providing teenagers with social and emotional learning skills they can use to navigate relationships and other life stressors. A teacher of Learning to Breathe said that she uses the same practices that the students use and feels like she is making more compassionate responses to her students.

Setting boundaries is another important step for wellness. The most compassionate people are the ones who have created boundaries around their time, according to sociologist and author Brené Brown (2020). A “no email in the evenings or on weekends” policy, which respects teachers’ nonwork time, is one strategy that can help. Recently, I saw a good example of a high school principal modeling this behavior. After receiving a request on

Friday, she sent a response on Monday that began by saying, “I really needed the weekend to rest and recover after almost losing one of our students to an overdose and being threatened ... by a student.”

Although all educators can take steps to implement these strategies, leaders are key for establishing the conditions and modeling the behaviors. For example, leaders can help with rest by scheduling yoga sessions for staff and students before school and with physical wellness by structuring meetings that allow for movement like having discussions while walking. They can also set the expectations for boundaries and commit to following them.

As author and activist bell hooks wrote, engaged pedagogy — which goes beyond merely teaching students curriculum standards or professional skills — requires that educators must commit “to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being” (hooks, 1994). That doesn’t always come naturally to educators, who tend to enter the profession as caregivers. But if educators are going to continue to be there for their students, they must learn to take care of themselves and their colleagues first. Wellness needs to be a priority across the educational system.

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