



## How do we cultivate resilience in an inequitable system?

BY SARAH YOUNG

**A**s an instructional coach and leader, I would be wealthy if I had a dollar for each time I heard an educator describe physical and emotional exhaustion due to systemic breakdowns that have occurred since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Struggling

with staffing shortages and intensified student needs, educators need resilience practices (Young, 2022). Yet what does it mean to ask people to be resilient in a dehumanizing and inequitable system that doesn't provide them with adequate funding, resources, or respect? How do we balance self-care with demands for changes to the systems that

cause the stress in the first place?

Just as importantly, how do we ensure that the steps we take are equitable and honor the voices and perspectives of all educators, including those who have been historically marginalized? As a white leader in adult social and emotional learning (SEL) work, I've had to learn how to take

responsibility for bringing an antiracist lens to work that was once considered universal but was actually framed through a lens of whiteness.

Coaching can be a powerful process for grappling with these questions and taking steps to address them. To illustrate how, I've created a composite story about coaching with an urban high school principal. This story and reflections that follow are drawn from multiple coaching conversations I've had with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) leaders. As the story shows, there are no clear-cut answers for solving the crisis in educator stress and mental health, but we can make progress by recognizing and validating the challenges, supporting self-care, and identifying steps toward systems change, and doing so with an inclusive and culturally responsive lens.

## ACKNOWLEDGING THE CHALLENGES

Late one afternoon, I sat down with Sheila Carson, an African American principal in an urban charter school serving mostly Black and Brown students in grades 9-12.

"How is it going this week, Sheila?" I asked.

"I've had it! I'm so tired, and I've had two migraines this week."

I listened, intent on staying open to what she had to say without trying to fix it.

She continued, "I thought the first year and a half of COVID was the worst thing ever, having to jump-start distance learning with no preparation and many of our families without even access to Wi-Fi. The second year, we came back in person, half my staff was out on a regular basis, and the students were not only behind academically, but they were socially regressed, traumatized even. Now, in year three, we've lost

**There are no clear-cut answers for solving the crisis in educator stress and mental health, but we can make progress by recognizing and validating the challenges, supporting self-care, and identifying steps toward systems change, and doing so with an inclusive and culturally responsive lens.**

staff at every level, and I'm not finding replacements."

Staffing was one of Carson's biggest stressors. Her school was short on math teachers and special ed teachers, and she said, "I have kids learning geometry on a multiple-choice computer program where no teachers interact with them at all." And it wasn't just teachers who were in short supply. Before the pandemic, the school had four mental health counselors, but now it was down to one. Some kids weren't making it to school because there weren't enough bus drivers. Making matters worse, Carson had no substitutes to call. "When staff are sick, I substitute myself and do my principal work at night," she said, adding, "I care about these kids so much, and I feel completely ineffective."

I took a deep breath to find my own stability and validated how hard this situation was. I knew that nurturing resilience could help reduce Carson's migraines and reduce the chance of her quitting at winter break, as was becoming increasingly common for highly stressed teachers and administrators in urban environments.

I flipped through my mental notes about cultivating resilience, drawing, in particular, on the work of Elena Aguilar: Resilient people foster joy,

purpose, and learning; listen deeply and are listened to; practice self-care; focus on sphere of influence and concern; and maintain strong community bonds (Aguilar, 2020). But how could I help her take steps in those directions without falling into shallow platitudes of what is sometimes known as toxic positivity (Psychology Today, 2022)?

I started by responding to her feelings. "Sheila, you say you feel ineffective. But the effectiveness gap is not in you. The gap is in the system. Your school wasn't adequately resourced before COVID, and now you have way fewer people serving students with greater economic, academic, and mental health needs than before." I paused and waited.

"Yes! I don't know how much more I could do even if I were to stop working altogether," Carson acknowledged.

"This is so much bigger than any one person can fix," I said. "It's an untenable situation, and it will take a lot of us working together to find channels for change. And I'd love to see you rested and pain-free before trying to extend your influence even further." I encouraged her to make some space for herself, even though it felt impossible.

## RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF SYSTEMS

At the same time, I wanted Carson to see the bigger picture. "We aren't the only ones having this conversation. There is a larger conversation taking place in the world of education, often led by BIPOC educators, about how to attend to self-care while still challenging a system that has been profoundly underresourced for a long time. Lack of adequate resources is amplified by our schools being served by a predominantly female workforce that is expected to have no personal

boundaries with time, energy, intelligence, and effort.”

I pulled up an article entitled, “YES. Teachers don’t need to be resilient; schools need to be more human” (Gorelik, 2022), which was inspired by a viral Twitter quote by educator Tracy Edwards: “Sat through a webinar on teacher resilience and was asked to share my thoughts. My answer: I don’t want to be resilient. I want school systems designed with humans in mind that don’t demand my resilience. I want educators to experience community, care, support, and compensation” (Edwards, 2022).

Gorelik agreed, writing: “What teachers need now, more than ever, is the feeling that their work matters, that who they are matters. The way to do that is to invest in teachers emotionally, physically, and professionally. We want to feel as critically important to the system as the students we are charged with teaching.” She called for system leaders to take steps such as inviting and listening to teacher feedback, giving teachers time to rest and recover, and respecting educators for the professional capital they bring (Gorelick, 2022).

“Yes, that’s right,” Carson said. “Only, where will I find time to fight for adequate resources for my students and compensation for me? And who else can fight? My colleagues are as tired as I am. And now we have white families and financially resourced BIPOC families leaving our schools faster than before. Who’s left with money and positional power to advocate?”

I had to think more about Carson’s questions and my own role in all this. There was no question she needed rest and health to function, yet how to present it without making her the problem?

After our meeting, I emailed her the Gorelik article and wrote, “Let me know if any part of this helpful.” She missed our next meeting, home with another migraine. I worried our

conversation had caused her more stress and she might return more discouraged. Instead, she was more animated.

“I really appreciated that article. I know it was written for teachers, but it applies to principals, too. Nobody is going to give me time to rest and recover. I just have to take it. So I spent a couple of days at home and unplugged, let my brand-new assistant principal take over, and crossed my fingers. He did good enough. I feel much better!”

Carson said she had also done some thinking about the systemic issues and had made phone calls to a few administrator friends. She homed in on the lack of substitutes and the fact that “in the wealthier district up the hill, they have way more subs because they pay them twice as much, and the subs think it’s easier to work up there.”

She and other principals from less-resourced schools decided they would go to the school board to demand the board seek outside funding to supplement substitute pay in the BIPOC schools. She said, “This is one of the wealthiest counties in the country. We can demand our board go to bat to get funders from the business world to step up. Everyone loves the word ‘equity,’ so here’s a chance to do something about it.”

Carson clearly felt empowered by the steps she and her colleagues had taken. She even felt better physically. “Since we wrote this set of demands about outside funding for substitutes, I haven’t had a single headache,” she said.

## APPLYING AN EQUITY LENS

Carson showed me a draft of the principals’ demands and asked what I thought. “I think it’s brilliant,” I said, impressed by the collective, equity-focused, concrete action plan. Yet there was something about the tone of the document that made me uneasy. I told her, “It sounds maybe ... too demanding for this board. If you calm it down a little, you might better keep them with you, no?”

Carson leaned back in her chair and narrowed her eyes. “Really?” She drew out the word. “Are you really going to sit there and be one more white woman telling me my tone as a Black woman is too demanding or angry?”

Much as it pained me to be included in this behavior, I knew what she was referring to. My work with white colleagues allowed me to witness many examples of white people assuming BIPOC colleagues were angry instead of considering first if they were speaking with passion and emphasis about issues that affected them deeply. I could see white fragility in everyone — except myself.

I paused, reminded myself that it’s OK to be uncomfortable, and grappled with my reaction. I wanted Carson and her colleagues to be successful, and I knew how defensive the members of this predominantly white school board could be, especially when they perceived the request to be angry and not honoring their intentions as the obvious “good guys.” My instinct was to advise her to use the ways of being and expressing emotion that I had been raised with. Upon reflection, though, I asked myself, “What makes you think you know the best form of expression for a group of BIPOC educators?”

As a white leader in SEL work, I used to promote the need for leaders and teachers to self-monitor and regulate emotion to help cultivate resilience among adults, as we asked teachers to do for students. My intention was to support educators to have choice about reactivity, reduce stress, and model the same skills for students. However, by doing so with a “color-evasive” lens (K. Walters, personal communication, October 10, 2022), my words sometimes had the impact of dismissing legitimate anger or frustration and silencing displays of powerful emotion.

As I reflected on Carson’s challenge to me, I thought about a powerful quote from a colleague and thought partner, Kimberly Walters, who had responded to a previous article of mine

on adult SEL: “The Black and Latinx communities navigate through our lives with a multitude of emotions, which can range from fear and anxiety to anguish and anger as a result of the injustices we experience economically, medically, educationally, criminally, and in many other areas of life. We are conditioned to manage these feelings in order to effectively function in society. These emotions are critical in order to fuel us to speak truth to power as we advocate for equity while causing ‘good trouble.’ We boldly acknowledge them and wear them as a badge of honor, not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of perseverance and strength” (K. Walters, personal communication, October 20, 2022).

Carson shared a similar sentiment. “Why can’t our righteous anger or our passion be part of our collective resilience?” she asked.

She was right, I realized. It’s not her job to take the passion and righteous anger out of the message. And it is my job to advocate with other white people in power, like the school board, for the message to be heard and not be discredited or dismissed because of tone. With a clearer view of my role, I realized I needed to ask Carson how best to support her and her colleagues — and then get to work doing that.

## ENGAGING WITH THE HARD QUESTIONS

The project to find funding for substitutes is still a work in progress in Carson’s district and in many hard-hit urban areas where massive staffing shortages continue to undermine morale and effectiveness and show no signs of obvious solution. This systemic issue exacerbated by the pandemic continues to lift up real dilemmas where highlighting resilience as a primary strategy can serve to enable systemic injustices.

As I continue to revise my own understanding of resilience, I believe we all have work to do as individuals and as leaders to recognize that resilience is not merely about individuals bounding back from adversity. It is about all of us learning from adversity and moving forward collectively to change unjust systems and untenable situations. And that work demands respect for diversity of voice and expression that is not defined by one particular cultural norm.

Educators like Sheila Carson need self-care *and* support *and* systemic change. It’s not an either/or situation but a both/and. We need to be able to soothe the assault of constant stress on our nervous systems, while not denying or becoming complacent about the conditions causing that stress. Coaches and other learning professionals need

to continue the conversation and find resilience practices that uphold us personally and also allow us to join in collective resilience as a force for change. And we all need to speak out and advocate so that those outside of education — policymakers, parents, community members, and others — support efforts to ensure that all educators can thrive in conditions that do not demand extraordinary resilience.

## REFERENCES

- Aguilar, E. (2020).** *Coaching for equity: Conversations that change practice.* John Wiley & Sons.
- Edwards, T. [@tracyrenee70]. (2022, March 22).** *Sat through a webinar on teacher resilience & was asked to share my thoughts.* [Tweet]. Twitter. [twitter.com/tracyrenee70/status/1498812420239675392?s=20](https://twitter.com/tracyrenee70/status/1498812420239675392?s=20)
- Gorelik, K. (2022, March 4).** *YES. Teachers don’t need to be resilient; schools need to be more human.* WeAreTeachers. [www.weareteachers.com/teacher-resiliency-stop/](http://www.weareteachers.com/teacher-resiliency-stop/)
- Psychology Today. (2022, March 30).** *Toxic positivity.* Author.

**Sarah Young (sarah@ sarahyoungconsulting.com) is a consultant and coach to schools, districts, and educator support programs. ■**

**learningforward**  
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION



Scan the code for more information.



## Online learning opportunities from Learning Forward

Advance your knowledge, skills, and practices with guidance from Learning Forward’s top practitioners and the highest-quality online learning experience available.

- **Powerful Practices for Professional Learning** – Begins July 12
- **Key Roles for Instructional Coaches** – Begins Aug. 7
- **Implementing a Coaching Cycle** – Begins Sept. 25

Visit [learningforward.org/online-courses](https://learningforward.org/online-courses) to learn more.

