



FOCUS ON WELLNESS

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3 WAYS TO APPROACH TEACHER WELLNESS DIFFERENTLY

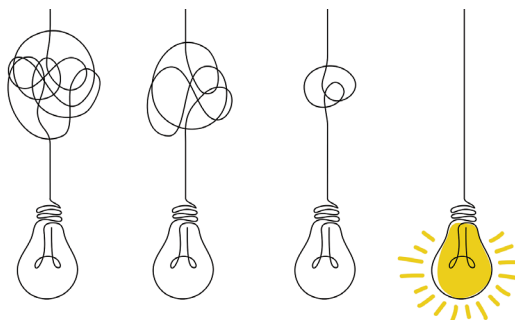
When we let go of how we've done things in the past and set clear goals and action plans for the future, real change happens.

You know what they say about doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results? In the interest of not going insane, I like to think back to Bill Murray's character in the movie *Groundhog Day*, where he had to repeat the same miserable day over and over again until one thing changed — he did. This coming school year, we have to follow his lead and make changes if we want to combat stress and burnout many educators have been feeling.

The 2022 Global Emotions Report from Gallup found that stress, worry, and sadness are at all-time highs and that rest and joy are at all-time lows (Ray, 2022). Stress and burnout are particularly high among educators (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). For the past few years, wellness initiatives and self-care guidance have popped up in workplaces all over, and schools and districts are no exception. However, it feels like those efforts are never enough and are failing our staff.

Just because what we are doing is not working, that doesn't mean there is no hope. When we know better, we can do better. This is our moment to break out of the Groundhog Day cycle by making meaningful changes that make our school communities more whole and our jobs

more sustainable. Based on my experience as a school leader and consultant to other schools, here are three ways I recommend approaching teacher wellness differently.



Ask teachers what they need. Start by asking teachers what they need to do their best work at school. For example, one of the questions I often ask educators is, “What might make a teacher feel unsafe at school?” The responses that come up most often are gossip, judgment, and lack of support. School leaders can use that information to make needed changes to school culture, leadership style, professional support, and other areas. Note that how you follow up is as important as listening to the answers. Otherwise, teachers will lose trust in you and the school. I like to follow up by making a collaborative action plan alongside teachers that addresses any concerns that come up.

Prioritize collaboration on instruction and learning. Educators entered the profession to make a difference by working with students. Unfortunately, educator attention has been diverted in other directions because we have been living in crisis mode for the past several years. Teachers want to get back to collaborating about student learning, especially around instructional strategies that work for their students that they can implement immediately. Prioritizing time and support for educators to learn about, implement, and reflect on these practices (rather than getting bogged down in administrative tasks) can help restore teachers' purpose and morale. That sense of purpose and accomplishment can do more for educators' wellness than a string of one-off events and snacks.

Choose just a few initiatives. As people who care deeply about our work, we want to do everything right now. But that can lead to exhaustion, and the reality is that if we try to fix everything, we end up fixing nothing. Instead, I encourage educators to select a few areas of focus and go all-in with them. This isn't as simple as it may sound. It means that you will need to have transparent

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curious and imaginative students.

Now is a great time to think differently about how we use time. My colleagues and I at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching are reimagining an educational landscape that is not bound by restrictions placed on educators and students because of the Carnegie Unit. The concept of the unit was developed in 1906 as a measure of the amount of time a student has studied a subject, and it has been used since then to determine how many credits students earn toward graduation. Much has changed since 1906, and in concert with others in the field, the Carnegie Foundation understands that learning in today’s world is not simply a function of students’ seat time in a classroom. As a corollary, teachers’ growth is not simply a function of the hours clocked in a professional learning session.

This is an important shift, and one that doesn’t necessarily happen quickly or easily. As a field, we haven’t made this shift in professional learning at scale yet. But we do have innovative models of professional learning not based on seat time, many of which

Learning Forward has espoused for decades, that we need to continue to practice and spread. They include instructional coaching, professional learning communities, and teacher action research, all of which center relationship building, collaboration, inquiry, and direct connections to the daily work of educators. Learning the methods of each model requires skill development, time, and flexible scheduling, but research continues to demonstrate the effectiveness of making those investments (Blazar, 2020; Nelson et al., 2008).

Here are questions every systems leader can ask to begin to separate professional learning from the traditional notions of time:

1. How is professional learning defined and measured in this system?
2. How is current professional learning rooted in relationships and inquiry?
3. What evidence is needed to demonstrate teacher learning?

Answering these questions and making changes doesn’t have to take generations. We collectively determine the pace of change, and we can start right now. The good news is that we

don’t have to finish the journey today. What is required of us today is to take one step away from the status quo and toward changes that rebuild the professional learning system to ensure our school communities become learning organizations for students and educators.

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conversations about what this will look like, what it will take, what the benefits will be, and how to move away from low-impact areas of focus. This strategy of focusing has many benefits for schools, students, and educators, including allowing teachers to have some space to take care of themselves and feel successful with the practices they are focusing on.

School leaders are essential to making these shifts. But principals are stretched thin and often feel like they are just keeping their heads above water. Leaders should reflect on what pulls them away from the things that

only a leader can do, like getting into classrooms regularly to provide feedback. Then make a proactive plan to reduce, eliminate, or delegate those things that are getting in the way. Even reducing those things by 10% will make a difference in your work and the day-to-day functions of the school.

It’s important to recognize that doing things differently does not happen overnight. Be patient with yourself and your colleagues, and take one step at a time. When we let go of how we’ve done things in the past and set clear goals and action plans for

the future, real change happens. And the absolute best way to help teachers feel well and whole at school is to help them be successful.

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