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FOR TEACHER APPRECIATION WEEK, A FOCUS ON WELLNESS



Learning Forward believes every week should be teacher appreciation week, and we believe in showing appreciation with ongoing support for teachers as professionals and as people. That includes prioritizing teacher wellness. This free resource compiles insights and advice from expert contributors to the Focus on Wellness column of our members-only publication, *The Learning Professional*. Whether you're a teacher or a leader who supports teachers, we hope you'll be inspired by the strategies shared here.



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

Laura L. Summers

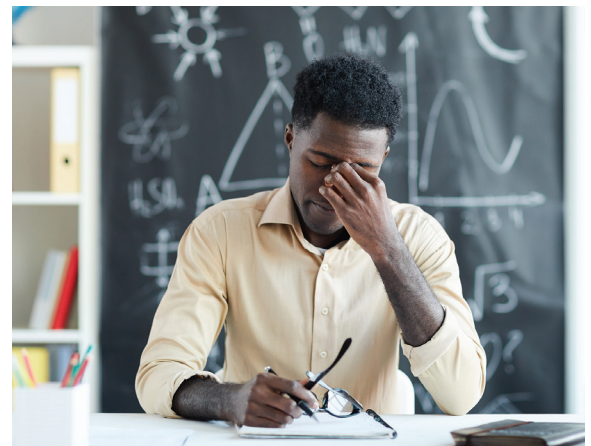
TEACHER BURNOUT IS REAL, BUT THERE ARE SOLUTIONS

“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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Education systems need to do more to promote teachers' well-being than the typical wellness week events. There is no quick fix to the stresses and challenges educators face.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Jacobē Bell

HEALING-CENTERED ENVIRONMENTS FILL GAPS IN EDUCATOR WELLNESS

In a climate where teachers are leaving the profession due to fatigue, burnout, and lack of support, education systems need to do more to promote teachers' well-being than the typical wellness week events like massages and catered lunches. They need to go deeper because there is no quick fix to the stresses and challenges educators face.

To foster well-being at a deeper level, we can take inspiration from a question commonly asked in improvement science: How do we get better at getting better (Bryk et al., 2015)? This question is usually about performance, efficiency, or effectiveness. But we also need to ask: How can we get better at cultivating the well-being of our people?

I believe this starts with creating a healing-centered environment and way of being. This is different from other school climate approaches because it takes a holistic approach and is rooted in

collective healing. In schools, we often talk about trauma-informed practices or social and emotional learning for students, but we don't explicitly address how the environment influences educators or how it could better support them.

A healing-centered approach fills that gap. It has three main components: It is culturally grounded, supports restoration of identity, and supports and attends to practitioner healing (Acosta, 2020; Ginwright, 2018).

Grounding in culture. Zaretta Hammond (2014) defines culture as "the way that every brain makes sense of the world. That is why everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, has a culture The brain uses cultural information to turn everyday happenings into meaningful events" (p. 22). Connecting to one's culture can help one feel more grounded, so by making all cultures matter in schools, we can cultivate a healthier work environment.

Reflection prompts can encourage culturally grounded wellness practices by changing our thinking habits, which in turn shape actions. These prompts might include asking yourself and your teams:

- Who are our teachers? What are their cultures and subcultures?
- What are the cultural values present in our school community?
- What are the cultural practices for healing that we champion, and what are those we push unwittingly to the side?

Affirming identity and humanity. Identity and culture are intertwined. Identity is who you are and is influenced by a unique set of characteristics, lived experiences, and social roles. Attending to identity can provide a sense of belonging, well-being, and confidence. But, in many schools, identity is not affirmed or celebrated, and this has caused harm to many educators because it slowly adds emotional weight and exacerbates tiredness that many teachers carry (Garcia, 2019).



Some thinking habits that are helpful for attending to teachers' identity and humanity in a healing-centered environment include asking:

- Are we seeing teachers beyond their cognitive abilities?
- How are we providing space for the full humanity of teachers?
- How does our school space validate and affirm teachers' multiple and intersectional identities?
- How are the cultures and identities of teachers present in professional learning?

Healing practices. Healing practices are those that help us acknowledge, metabolize, and heal from the challenges we face as teachers. This is about fully articulating our own and our colleagues' humanity (Garcia, 2019). Some questions to consider for fostering healing practices are:

- How are we building relationships with teachers?
- How are we building systems that support collective healing?
- How are we building space for restorative or transformative justice?
- How are we engaging in critical reflection?
- In professional learning, are we providing space for teachers to reflect on how their lived experiences shape their work?

To create spaces for educators to

flourish, we must consider the mind, body, and spirit of a person as equally important. If we disinvest in any of these areas, we are contributing to teacher burnout. We must also work in partnership with teachers because well-being is a collective endeavor.

There is no one way to engage in healing-centered environments and ways of being in your school. If you're wondering where to begin, start with talking to your staff. Ask the hard questions. Sit in discomfort and do generous listening. Here are some questions you can ask, which you may want to adapt to your own context:

- Tell me about a time you felt like your humanity was honored in our school community.
- Tell me about a time when navigating a situation or environment in our school community was hard. What was the effect it had on you?
- What is one word that describes how your self-care has been this year? How has the school community contributed or detracted from this?
- Do you feel your job here is sustainable? What would make the job more sustainable?
- What could I do to create a culture of well-being for staff?

After these conversations, engage in the healing-centered thinking habits and reflection questions described

above and work to create ways for the staff to envision and re-create together. Consider spending time at your next staff meeting or professional learning community engaging in a dreaming activity where they imagine what a healing-centered environment and way of being could look like, sound like, and feel like, and what a potential first step could be. Dreaming is where change first begins. Dream big, critically reflect, and then take action.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Victoria E. Romero

TO COMBAT STRESS, CREATE A RESILIENT SCHOOL COMMUNITY

For additional resources about building educators' resilience, see the online version of this article at bit.ly/3WMCFTD.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some lessons about the social and emotional needs of people working in habitually stressful environments. To learn how teachers were coping during the early stage of the pandemic, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence surveyed educators about their most frequent daily emotions. Within three days, 5,000 respondents said they were feeling anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). This was not a new trend. In 2017, when asked the same questions, 7,000 teachers responded and said their most frequently felt daily emotions were frustrated, overwhelmed, and stressed (Brackett & Baron, 2018). The pandemic only made a stressful job more stressful.



Educators begin their careers with compassionate ideals. We are caring people who see ourselves wanting to make a difference in students' lives. But if teachers go to work each day feeling any of the emotions from the two surveys, they and our students suffer. Working under duress adversely impacts cognition, decision-making, and ability to maintain relationships, physical health, and emotional well-being, all of which are essential to be effective practitioners.

It also makes us prime candidates for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. Burnout has a slow progression; it happens over time. It can manifest as fatigue, frustration, anger, negativity, or withdrawal. In contrast, compassion fatigue is spontaneous. A co-worker or a student pushes our buttons, and suddenly we're incapable of feeling empathetic. Signs include, but are not limited to, sadness and grief, nightmares, reduced empathy toward others, detachment, and avoidance of work or personal relationships.

Vicarious or secondary trauma occurs when we develop beliefs and feelings as though we experienced a negative event that happened to someone else. Listening to a student's or colleague's retelling of a traumatic event can trigger this reaction, especially if trauma is widespread in our environment. This can cause anxiety, sadness, intrusive thoughts, physical symptoms, trouble with relationships, and other difficulties. It's important to understand how these related concepts are distinct, how they impact our work, and how we can recognize their signs and symptoms.

Even more importantly, we must be intentional about creating and sustaining resilient school cultures so that everyone can cope with stress and trauma, bounce back from adversity, and move forward toward success. In many high-performing, high-poverty schools, faculty have figured this out. Understanding that they have no control over their students' home lives, economic security, or the communities where they live, educators are intentional about building a culture that fosters resilience and social and emotional competencies for themselves and their students.

The entire faculty — including administrators, teachers, cafeteria workers, and custodial

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personnel — works together to create a culture based on mutual trust, a shared vision, and collegiality. Recognizing the high risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, they know and value how to care for each other. But it's not just high-poverty schools that should commit to creating such environments. In the face of a global pandemic, a drug epidemic, and school shootings, educators in all communities should be intentional about building school cultures that promote wellness.

Fostering a resilient school community begins with helping the adults put on their own oxygen masks first. These steps can help.

Create short surveys to gather information on the well-being of your staff and colleagues. Questions might include:

- On a daily basis while at work, what are your three most frequent emotions?
- What are your social and emotional needs at work?
- How well do you know the symptoms of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma?
- How well do you understand the various realms of trauma (household, environment, and community) and their impact on behavior (Quinn, 2020)?
- Are you able to recognize when you or a colleague might be struggling emotionally?
- In terms of building a culture that promotes wellness at work, what suggestions do you have for professional learning?

After gathering data, determine possible next steps to incorporate self-care into your district, school, grade-level, or department improvement plans. Watch and discuss videos of schools and districts that focus on developing strong environmental cultures and positive relationships. Note that all roles should be included because creating a supportive environment is a whole-staff approach. See a list of example videos

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Research specific strategies educators can use to support wellness at work. Draw on organizations and publications such as *The Learning Professional*, Edutopia, Mindful Schools, and Greater Good in Education. Strategies might include:

- Tap in/tap out: When teachers need to step out of their classrooms to recharge and refocus, they text a colleague to cover their class.
- Healing circles for teachers: Staff members sit in a circle to reflect and problem-solve together, support each other, and share small victories.
- Wellness check-ins: Leaders check in with staff during meetings and events to assess how they are feeling physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially, allowing leaders to make adjustments to agendas or even postpone when appropriate. Simple hand signals like thumbs up/down help with check-ins.
- Create a wellness at work column: Leaders share links to short articles, wellness tips, and videos in a regular electronic bulletin or other form of communication, sending the message that the commitment to wellness is ongoing and sustainable.
- Mindfulness for teachers: Teachers focus on the present moment and notice feelings and thoughts without judgment or interpretation. Research shows that it helps minimize negative biases (Torres, 2014). It is a practice

that faculty can do for less than five minutes during their planning times.

Encourage faculty, team, or department members to assess how well they are balancing work and life and engaging in self-care. This can be accomplished using an online self-care self-assessment. In addition, suggest staff add a wellness or self-care goal to their annual professional objectives and identify a colleague as a support person.

As you take these steps, don't forget about the power of humor. Laughter relieves physical tension, improves heart health, lowers blood pressure, and floods the body with hormones connected to well-being (Field, 2021).

You are an essential worker. Remember to put on your oxygen mask first, and that will allow you to help your colleagues and students.

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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.

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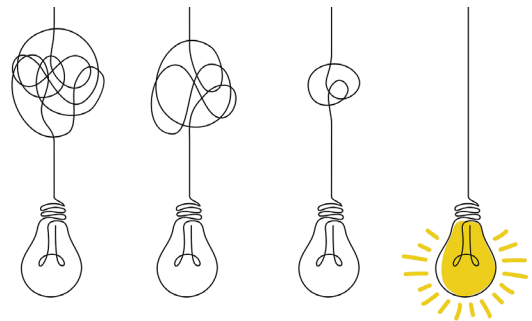
FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Allyson Apsey

3 WAYS TO APPROACH TEACHER WELLNESS DIFFERENTLY

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 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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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Julia Mahfouz

MEANING AND PURPOSE ARE KEY TO PRINCIPALS' WELL-BEING

One critical aspect of self-care is intricately linked with what psychologists and sociologists refer to as prosociality — extending our inner selves for others.

Burnout rates among principals are high, largely due to the immense pressure principals face in striving to achieve demanding academic standards for students, while simultaneously adapting to constant changes and effectively collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders during strenuous times.

Lately, self-care and attending to one's well-being have become a topic of frequent conversation in and outside of schools. Principals are often reminded to prioritize their own well-being by managing their time and setting boundaries, using self-care strategies and stress reduction techniques, maintaining a work-life balance, and attending to their own mental, social, and emotional health.

While these practices are undoubtedly important, the focus on individual well-being can lead to a sense of detachment from the very people principals are serving and away from the core reason and purpose that make their work meaningful. When school leaders feel their job is meaningful, their job satisfaction is higher, which also alleviates emotional exhaustion and, by extension, burnout.

In our pursuit of self-care, we may have inadvertently overlooked a crucial element: ubuntu, a concept deeply rooted in African philosophy (Murithi, 2006), that translates to “I am because we are,” emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of communal well-being. It focuses on the idea that our well-being is closely tied to the well-being of others and that, by supporting and nurturing our communities, we, in turn, nourish ourselves. Ubuntu is about development of one's “fullness of being” through our understanding of how we are “beings with others.” In our Prosocial Leader Lab at the University of Colorado Denver, we consider ubuntu — marked by compassion, mutual support, respect, acceptance, care, and dignity — as one of the pillars of the community culture we try to live by (Nussbaum, 2003).

In the realm of school leadership, ubuntu offers a profound lesson: One critical aspect of self-care is intricately linked with what psychologists and sociologists refer to as prosociality — extending our inner selves for others. Prosociality encompasses three distinct facets: motivation, the individual's desire to promote the welfare of others beyond self-advancement or financial gains; behavior, individual actions intended to help others and the organization flourish without the expectation of being rewarded; and impact, the feeling of making positive difference in the lives of others throughout one's work (Brief & Motowildo, 1986; Grant, 2007, 2008; Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Organ et al., 2006). Research shows that prosocial competencies, such as collaborating to help others, solve problems, and achieve goals, are an important element of effective school leadership (Benoliel & Somech, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Jäppinen et al., 2015), and that teachers highly regard principals who consider themselves servant leaders (Taylor et al., 2007).

This is exactly what my colleagues and I found in our research with the program Soul of Leadership: Courage, Presence, and Integrity. Soul of Leadership is a professional learning program that gives school administrators the opportunity to reflect on their lives and work



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through contemplative and reflective practices drawn from the Center for Courage & Renewal and the fields of mindfulness, social and emotional learning, neuroscience, the arts, and the work of Parker J. Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach* (Massachusetts School Administrators' Association, n.d.; Palmer, 2017). Participating principals shared how principalship can be isolating and draining and emphasized the importance of relationships and networking with other principals who are going through similar experiences. We also found that principals were driven by a strong sense of mission, not by ego, career progress, or the pursuit of self-actualization. The meaningfulness of school leaders' work lies in their role to give back and actively participate in the educational community.

This sense of mission suggests that school leaders can benefit from embracing ubuntu, shifting from isolated self-care to prosociality. Prosocial school leaders actively engage in acts of kindness, gratitude, support, and collaboration. They cultivate a sense of empathy, compassion, and a genuine concern for the well-being of others. They understand that their role extends beyond administrative tasks. They are stewards of a shared vision for the betterment of students, teachers, and society at large.

When school leaders actively engage with the concept of ubuntu, they not only improve their own well-being but also create stronger, more resilient school communities and contribute to the collective success and thriving of the entire school ecosystem. If the

past years' events taught us anything, it is that our ability to navigate uncertainty, adapt to new challenges, and persevere in the face of adversity hinges not just on individual strength, but on our capacity to come together as a community. We've learned that our collective well-being depends on our willingness to extend compassion, empathy, gratitude, and support to one another. Thus, while sustaining one's self is crucial, it is serving our schools and communities that brings meaning and purpose to what we do. This purpose is what keeps us striving for betterment of ourselves and our societies.

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Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings.

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FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Heather Lageman

GIVE THE GIFT OF WELLNESS TO OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

This magazine's Focus on Wellness series has covered many important topics, including teacher burnout, healing-centered environments, resilient school communities, teacher wellness, and principals' well-being. As we wrap up the series, I want to focus on the connection among all of these topics, which is also the foundational connection among all of us: our shared humanity.

Wellness is about tapping into who we are and who we can become as human beings. It comes from within us and ripples out in all of our relationships. Developing wellness starts with three processes grounded in that humanity: knowing ourselves, listening to each other, and connecting. As the executive

director of organizational development & leadership at Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland, I am deeply invested in those processes, for myself and for the educators and leaders I work with, because I see firsthand how they make a difference for people and schools.



KNOWING OURSELVES

One of the most important relationships in your life is the relationship with yourself. To fully embrace our shared humanity, you first need to know who you are. My journey to knowing myself began as I was running a race, both literally and figuratively. I love to run and I like to use that time to reflect. But I had started to dread climbing out of bed in the morning for the early runs that I used to cherish. I was tired. I didn't like the "me" that was not filled with as much hope and energy and optimism as usual. But none of the things that I usually did, including running, helped.

I decided to try investing in myself by working with a coach. One of our first activities was to explore core values. Core values are like our North Star or our internal GPS — the things that are most important to us and keep us headed in the direction of our purpose in life. Discovering my core values — joy, kindness, courage, gratitude, vulnerability — had a profound centering impact on my life. Knowing them helped me focus on taking the time to feel my life and align my choices and actions to my core values.

Working with my coach enabled me to set goals and boundaries to honor my core values, thereby aligning the resources around me so that they empower me, increasing my sense of well-being and expanding my ability to be a fully present colleague and leader.

In addition, I discovered that part of wellness and happiness at work is reflecting on how closely the individual and the organization line up on values, vision, and relationships because without alignment, the employee will not be fulfilled and the organization will not be served.

Using a leaders' dashboard helped me examine the vision, mission, and culture of my organization and how it aligns with my core values and purpose, enabling me to connect, contribute and collaborate with intentionality. After doing this work to tap into my own humanity, I began to feel more energized, more hopeful, and more like myself again.

LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

The most generous gift we can give is to listen because when we listen, we give our time and our whole being, physically and spiritually. Listening is the key to true connection. As I reflected on what makes me feel whole and well, I realized that I wasn't listening to my colleagues and friends as much as I intended to. To use the running metaphor, I had put myself on a treadmill of activities and commitments.

After attending a workshop on mindfulness and compassion based on Brach's (2019) book *Radical Compassion*, I came to see that, in trying to do so many things to support colleagues and loved ones, I was stretched too thin to listen and connect. Participating in this model with total strangers taught me that practicing mindfulness and compassion helps me be fully present to listen deeply. That kind of presence and engagement creates strong, trusting relationships, and those relationships are key to finding our shared humanity and wellness for everyone involved.

In addition, there are lots of tools to help all of us be deeper listeners and more compassionate, humane leaders. Some resources that I found helpful are Tandem Solutions' conversational framework, which is rooted in neuroscience and emphasizes listening techniques to build strong relationships (Tandem Solutions, n.d.), and empathy interviews (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020).

CONNECTING

Connecting and building rich relationships that align with your core values is also key to establishing a form of wellness that is grounded in shared humanity. As many wise leaders have

pointed out in recent years, our society needs a revival of relationships. In a time of disconnection, polarization, and isolation, we need to make an active decision to be in relationships with one another, unlike in previous eras when interdependent relationships were the norm in all parts of life.

Schools are inherently social places, but that doesn't mean we are intentionally developing relationships. Doing so is an important part of rebuilding and staying connected to our shared humanity.

There are many approaches to rebuilding those relationships in schools. One I recommend is asset mining. Taking the time to name who my people are and who I want to dream with and learn with provided me with a road map for intentional connection. It helped me identify to whom I can reach out to give and get support and inspiration.

I also recommend an activity sociologist and speaker Brené Brown developed called Square Squad (Brown, 2018). It helped me think about who matters in my life and if my relationships were serving me. I discovered much of my time was devoted to acquaintanceships rather than relationships, largely because many of the commitments filling up my calendar were out of a sense of obligation. Recognizing this allowed me to reprioritize my time and energy.

INVEST IN YOURSELF

For me, the journey of self-discovery is a journey of personal and professional wellness. It has helped me come into my own as a learner and a leader. I encourage all educators to make these investments in themselves and

experience the benefits.

The benefits for me have included having more patience with myself and others, feeling more comfortable advocating for myself and others, setting clear boundaries, and apologizing less. My relationships are richer, and there is more peace and joy in my life.

It can feel daunting to embark on this kind of journey, so I recommend starting with some simple reflection questions:

- What brings you joy?
- What brings you peace?
- What makes you feel connected?
- What makes you feel whole?

During this time of year, when many people and cultures are celebrating holiday traditions, let's give the gift of wellness to ourselves and each other by standing up for our humanity and each other's humanity. Now and throughout the year, may we all have the space and grace to know ourselves, listen, and connect with others. We have the potential to change ourselves and everyone we encounter for the better.

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