



# Australian studies link teacher well-being to student outcomes

BY REBECCA J. COLLIE

**M**any countries around the world are facing issues related to low levels of teacher well-being. In Australia, for example, there is a severe teacher

shortage, resulting in many understaffed schools. Although this shortage is due to a confluence of factors, part of the cause stems from the fact that the support provided to teachers in recent years has not kept pace with

the increasing professional demands. Reduced support and increased demands have led to higher stress, lower well-being, and greater attrition in the workforce (New South Wales Department of Education, 2023).



Supporting teacher well-being is a worthy and critical aim in itself, but it also has a larger benefit because teacher well-being has ramifications for instruction and student well-being. Teacher and student functioning are inherently intertwined, so efforts to promote well-being among each party are likely to have carryover effects to the other.

My colleagues and I have conducted several recent studies looking at teacher and student well-being in Australia, with a particular focus on factors that predict greater well-being. In this research, we generally define well-being as feeling good and functioning effectively.

The “feeling good” part of that definition reflects experiences such as job satisfaction for teachers, school satisfaction for students, and a sense of vitality at school for both. The “functioning effectively” part of the definition reflects experiences such as work engagement and low quitting intentions for teachers, and academic engagement and low behavioral misconduct for students. In our studies, we include well-being variables tapping into all of these aspects.

## FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHER WELL-BEING

Working conditions play an important role in teacher well-being, including both *job resources*, which are

supportive factors that boost teacher well-being, and *job demands*, which are hindering factors that reduce teachers’ well-being.

In a recent study with 426 Australian teachers (Collie, 2023), I examined how factors from both categories affect several dimensions of teacher well-being — vitality (the vigor and passion teachers exhibit toward their profession), engagement (the effort teachers demonstrate in their job responsibilities), and professional growth striving (teachers’ investment to enhance their professional competencies and expertise), as well as teacher attrition, as measured by teachers’ quitting intentions.

The study found that two types of job resources related to interpersonal connections were associated with greater levels of all three well-being dimensions:

- *Autonomy-supportive leadership*, which pertains to teachers’ views that their principal fosters their self-motivation and self-empowerment; and
- *Relatedness with students*, which reflects teachers’ sense of having positive interpersonal interactions with their students.

In addition, another type of interpersonal connection, relatedness with colleagues (or sense of belonging), was positively associated with professional growth striving and lower

quitting intentions, underscoring the significance of robust collegial networks.

A job demand, time pressure, was negatively associated with vitality, yet it showed a positive association with increased engagement. This latter finding seems counterintuitive but has been shown in previous research. It likely occurred because a sense of urgency can have a motivating effect in specific circumstances — when we are busy, we often get more done. At the same time, prolonged exposure to time pressure could have negative consequences. In fact, this study also showed that time pressure was associated with greater quitting intentions.

In another study, we found that teachers who experienced a combination of high workload and low levels of autonomy over their work tasks were more likely to want to quit (Collie & Carroll, 2023).

Together, these studies suggest that working conditions and aspects of school environments affect teachers’ well-being, as well as their likelihood of leaving their schools or the teaching workforce altogether.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Importantly, teachers’ working conditions and well-being also have implications for student achievement.

In a study of 486 teachers in 39 elementary schools in New South Wales, we looked at the relationship between teachers' emotional exhaustion, which is a key indicator of burnout, and student achievement (Granziera et al., 2023).

We looked at school-level averages of teachers' responses and students' achievement because we wanted to explore how this relationship may be affected by school factors such as school climate and the social contagion of burnout, above and beyond individual factors.

Schools where teachers had higher levels of emotional exhaustion had lower levels of student achievement, on average. This was consistent with previous research that has found individual teachers' levels of emotional exhaustion are associated with lower levels of student achievement (Arens & Morin, 2016) and opens avenues for more exploration of whether and how those feelings and connections with low achievement may be affected by school-level factors or spread among colleagues.

This study did not allow us to look at the direction of the relationship between the variables, so it is possible that teachers' emotional exhaustion was influenced by students' achievement or by an additional mediating factor. But findings suggest that education leaders should pay close attention to how these factors are related.

### WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Our research offers insights into practices that schools can adopt to support teachers and therefore students. First, school leaders can promote teachers' empowerment and sense of autonomy (Collie, 2021). Specific strategies include granting them opportunity to determine their work methods, encouraging their participation in decision-making processes and school policy formation, and providing explanations and rationales for the assignment of work tasks, which shows respect and active consideration of the teacher in the decision-making process.

**Teachers in Australia are expected to engage in professional learning each year. For example, in New South Wales, teachers working full-time are expected to complete 100 hours of professional learning every five years to maintain their teacher accreditation.**

Second, school leaders can work to foster a sense of belonging between teachers and students. Some specific strategies include embedding schoolwide social and emotional learning programs, developing a school mission that prioritizes positive interpersonal interactions, and emphasizing a professional learning focus that aims to boost positive interactions in the classroom.

All teachers in Australia (and many other countries) are expected to engage in professional learning each year. For example, in New South Wales (the most populous state in Australia), teachers working full-time are expected to complete 100 hours of professional learning every five years to maintain their teacher accreditation. Some of that time can focus on strategies for developing positive teacher-student relationships, even within the context of learning about new curricula or other professional learning topics.

Third, leaders can have an impact on well-being and, ultimately, student outcomes by simplifying teachers' workloads whenever feasible. For example, they can reduce the volume of administrative tasks and ensure that professional learning time is spent on substantive topics, rather than procedural matters that can be addressed via email.

Some may try reducing the amount of face-to-face teaching hours required of teachers, taking inspiration from countries where teachers have ample

time for collaboration, planning, and research. Encouraging collaboration and teamwork among teachers has other benefits as well, including distributing responsibilities and boosting teachers' opportunities to learn from one another.

These documented strategies for building positive school and classroom climates can benefit both teachers and students, in many kinds of schools and contexts, in Australia and beyond.

### REFERENCES

- Allen, K. & Kern, P. (2018).** School vision and mission statements should not be dismissed as empty words. *The Conversation*, 14.
- Arens, A.K. & Morin, A.J. (2016).** Relations between teachers' emotional exhaustion and students' educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(6), 800.
- Collie, R.J. (2021).** COVID-19 and teachers' somatic burden, stress, and emotional exhaustion: Examining the role of principal leadership and workplace buoyancy. *AERA Open*.
- Collie, R.J. (2023).** Teacher well-being and turnover intentions: Investigating the roles of job resources and job demands. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(3), 712-726.
- Collie, R.J. & Carroll, A. (2023).** Autonomy-pressure profiles among teachers: Changes over a school term, leadership predictors, and workplace outcomes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 124, 103998.
- Granziera, H., Martin, A.J., & Collie, R.J. (2023).** Teacher well-being and student achievement: A multilevel analysis. *Social Psychology of Education*, 26(2), 279-291.
- New South Wales Department of Education. (2023).** *NSW government response to parliamentary inquiry into teacher shortages*. Author.
- 
- Rebecca J. Collie (rebecca.collie@unsw.edu.au) is a Scientia associate professor of educational psychology in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. ■**