

STAFF WELL-BEING CHECK-IN TOOLKIT

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have felt the effects of COVID-19 for more than a year. For many teachers, the pandemic has meant longer and harder hours, making an already stressful work environment even more intense and causing many to question whether they can (and want) to continue in the profession. In an October 2020 survey conducted by RAND, 57% of teachers reported working more hours per week than they did prior to COVID-19. Half of the teachers surveyed were working 48 hours or more. As a result, teachers' well-being has suffered, with 80% indicating burnout as a moderate or major concern. One-quarter considered themselves likely to leave the profession. Such attrition would exacerbate the teacher shortages many districts already were experiencing before the pandemic. Even if teachers remain in their roles, their burnout could have negative consequences not just for them, but for their students and colleagues. Burnout decreases teachers' motivation and concentration, affecting their instructional practice and their students' achievement. Burnout also erodes teachers' morale, impacting their relationships with their students and colleagues.

To reduce—and ultimately prevent—burnout, districts need to ensure all administrators and other managers, teachers, and staff understand the causes and can recognize the physical, mental, emotional, and social symptoms—in themselves and others. By regularly checking in with teachers and staff, district and school leaders can listen to their experiences, monitor their well-being, share strategies for managing stress, and connect them to any additional supports they need.

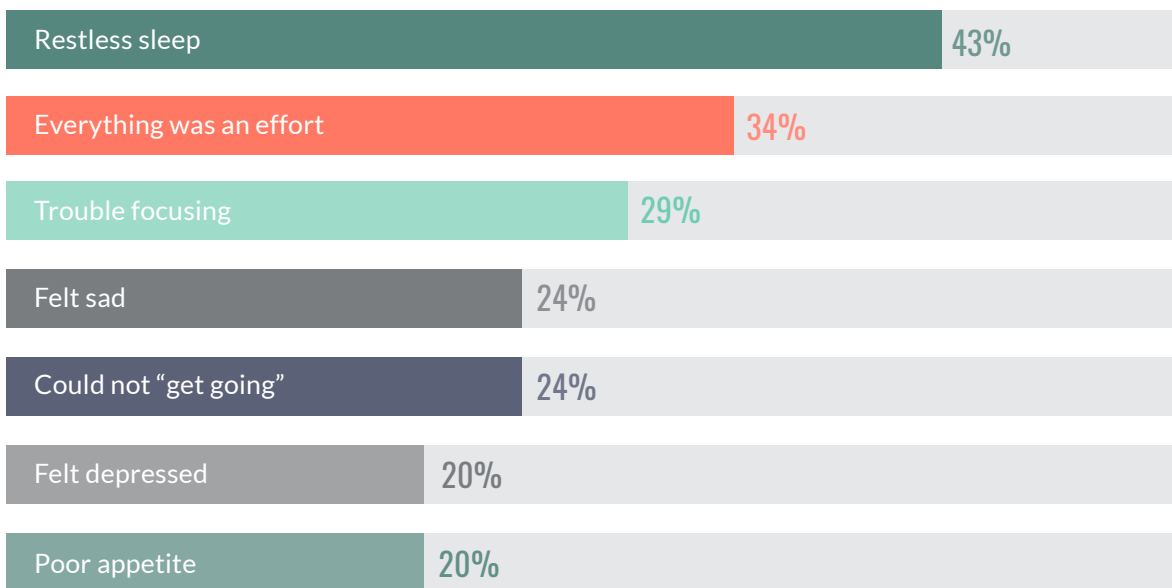
THIS TOOLKIT CAN HELP DISTRICTS IMPROVE STAFF WELLNESS BY:

- ✓ Understanding the state of teacher and staff mental health
- ✓ Monitoring staff well-being
- ✓ Providing supports and resources
- ✓ Building a supportive staff culture

THE STATE OF TEACHER AND STAFF MENTAL HEALTH

Teachers experience high levels of stress during a typical school year, and COVID-19 has intensified this pressure by making them fearful of becoming infected, increasing their social isolation, and subjecting them to greater economic uncertainty—while also changing how they instruct their students. Teachers have helped their students cope with COVID-19 as well, placing teachers at increased risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress (or the emotional and physical impacts of exposure to others’ suffering).

TEACHERS WHO REPORTED EXPERIENCING VARIOUS SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION AT LEAST OCCASIONALLY DURING THE PAST 7 DAYS



Source: EdPolicyWorks, University of Virginia, and Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles²⁹

As teachers continue to feel stressed, anxious, and exhausted over time, they eventually get “burned out.” Teachers may become so drained and discouraged that they decide to exit the profession altogether. In fact, stress remains the most common reason teachers cite for leaving their job over the past year. This attrition poses a serious problem for districts already facing teacher shortages and challenges with recruitment.

Teachers influence student achievement more than any other school-based factor. To effectively support students, teachers need to feel physically, mentally, and emotionally well. Improving teachers’ well-being enables them to be more effective in the classroom and form more positive relationships with students and colleagues. As stress levels decrease and morale improves, teachers also typically have fewer absences and less turnover.

MONITORING STAFF WELL-BEING

REGULAR CHECK-INS HELP DISTRICT LEADERS IDENTIFY STRESS AND BURNOUT IN TEACHERS AND STAFF

Administrators and other managers should check in with all employees at least once a week during and after a crisis. In a remote environment, these check-ins can take the form of individual video check-ins, online office hours, and/or regular team conference calls. Administrators and other managers with limited time or capacity should consider monitoring employee well-being through the establishment of a "buddy system." Recommendations for the content of these conversations are shared below.



Ask how they are doing and feeling, and ask how their families are doing. Make sure they feel heard and understood.



Find small ways to show your support and care. Help them identify solutions to problems and find support services.



Learn who is in their support network and how they access their network during times of social isolation.



Check that they are taking care of themselves: eating, sleeping, taking breaks, finding time for hobbies, etc.

Source: American Health Care Association (AHCA) and the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL)

MONITORING STAFF WELL-BEING

SIGNS OF BURNOUT AND STRESS

Administrators and other managers should also use check-ins to identify signs of burnout and secondary traumatic stress:



BURNOUT

Feeling exhausted and overwhelmed



SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

Stress resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experiences, rather than from direct exposure to a traumatic event

THREE CATEGORIES OF WARNING SIGNS FOR BURNOUT



PHYSICAL

Can include chronic fatigue and exhaustion. However, other signs may also be evident, such as trouble paying attention, confusion, constantly being on the “lookout” for danger, or startling easily. Sleeping and eating problems, headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension may also be experienced.



EMOTIONAL

Can include excessive worry or anxiety about the crisis victims, disconnection or numbing, extreme anger at the situation, or feelings of compassion fatigue, demoralization, or resignation. Individuals may also find they have recurrent crisis thoughts or distressing dreams, experience a constant replaying of the events, or even have some confusion and difficulty making everyday decisions.



SOCIAL OR INTERPERSONAL

Can include serious difficulties in relationships at home or work. Irritability, outbursts of anger, social withdrawal, or isolation can sometimes be seen as extreme stress reactions. Other signs can include attempts to over-control at work or compulsions to be a “rescuer” or part of every crisis situation.

Source: The National Association of School Psychologists

PROVIDING SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recommends that administrators and other managers use the Stress First Aid (SFA) model to support employees experiencing challenges to well-being as a result of COVID-19. The SFA model provides guiding questions that administrators and other managers can use to assess employees' stress reactions along a continuum. The SFA model includes five components, and the Department of Veterans Affairs recommends that administrators and other managers use the questions listed below to assess each component.

QUESTIONS TO PROMPT A DISCUSSION WITH TEACHERS AND STAFF ABOUT SELF-CARE

COMPONENT	QUESTIONS
COVER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the pandemic affected your sense of safety? If it has, what can we do to help?
CALM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you doing? • What changes have you experienced regarding sleep, feelings of being on edge, or ability to stay calm? • If you are having trouble staying calm, is there anything we can do to help?
CONNECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has there been an impact on how you talk with each other, work morale, or connecting with family and friends? • Is there someone you feel comfortable talking with about this? • Has anyone you know done or said something that really helped? • Do you feel the need for practical support right now?
COMPETENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any concerns about being able to handle what's going on in your life, deal with your stress reactions, or do your work? • What are some things that you have done to cope that have been helpful in the past or have been helpful recently? • What else could we do that would help?
CONFIDENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you noticed any change in your confidence in your ability to do your job the same way as before the outbreak or your confidence in leadership? • Are you feeling guilty or wish you could do something differently? • Does the outbreak hold special meaning or connect with other experiences in any way? • What else could help?

Administrators and other managers should encourage employees to engage in self-care, debrief with other staff members about their experience, and take advantage of available resources, such as Employee Assistance Programs.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD

CASE STUDY: HOW DOUGLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT MAKES STAFF WELL-BEING A TOP PRIORITY

Recognizing that the different instructional models needed to support students over the past year have created a more stressful working environment for staff, Douglas County School District in Colorado has made staff well-being a top priority. To support staff during this stressful year of transitions, Douglas County has leveraged the district’s partnerships to provide offerings that emphasize physical and mental health. For example, Douglas County offers a health education program, activities, and resources to help staff sustain healthier lifestyles (e.g., nutrition counseling, eating plans, virtual cooking classes, virtual exercise sessions). Podcasts educate staff on how burnout develops and how to prevent it, and short webinars assist staff in incorporating wellness breaks into their workday. The district also monitors staff well-being through check-ins. Principals conduct periodic check-ins with individuals and groups, as well as follow-up check-ins when needed. A discussion guide helps principals structure the check-ins, making conversations constructive and ensuring staff feel comfortable. In addition to monitoring staff well-being, the check-ins establish an ongoing dialogue between staff and principals and facilitate efforts to connect staff with supports. Douglas County prioritizes staff well-being in other ways as well—e.g., by not overloading staff when planning professional development opportunities and new initiatives.

BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE STAFF CULTURE

BEST PRACTICES FOR DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERS

In general, district and school administrators should adopt the following best practices for leading and managing in times of crisis in order to create a supportive culture in which staff feel comfortable asking for and getting help.



Lead with empathy



Be alert in case some employees are feeling isolated



Encourage video check-ins, but give employees the choice of audio-only check-ins



Set expectations and establish work goals based on output



Be authentic



Make sure employees feel in the loop



Ask how team members are doing on a personal level

SOURCE LIST

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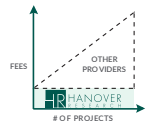
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