ascd educational leadership

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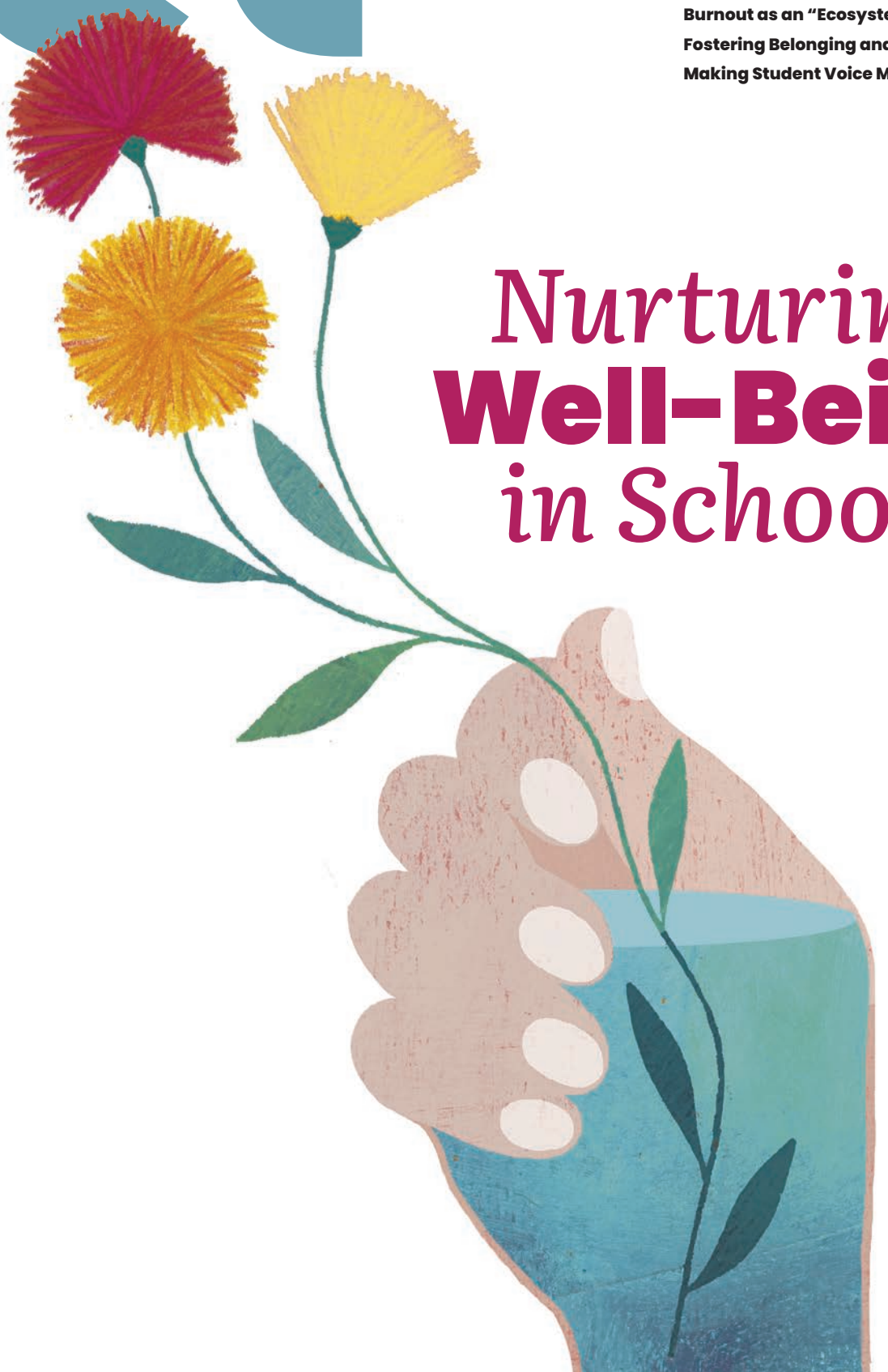
Nurturing **Well-Being** *in Schools*



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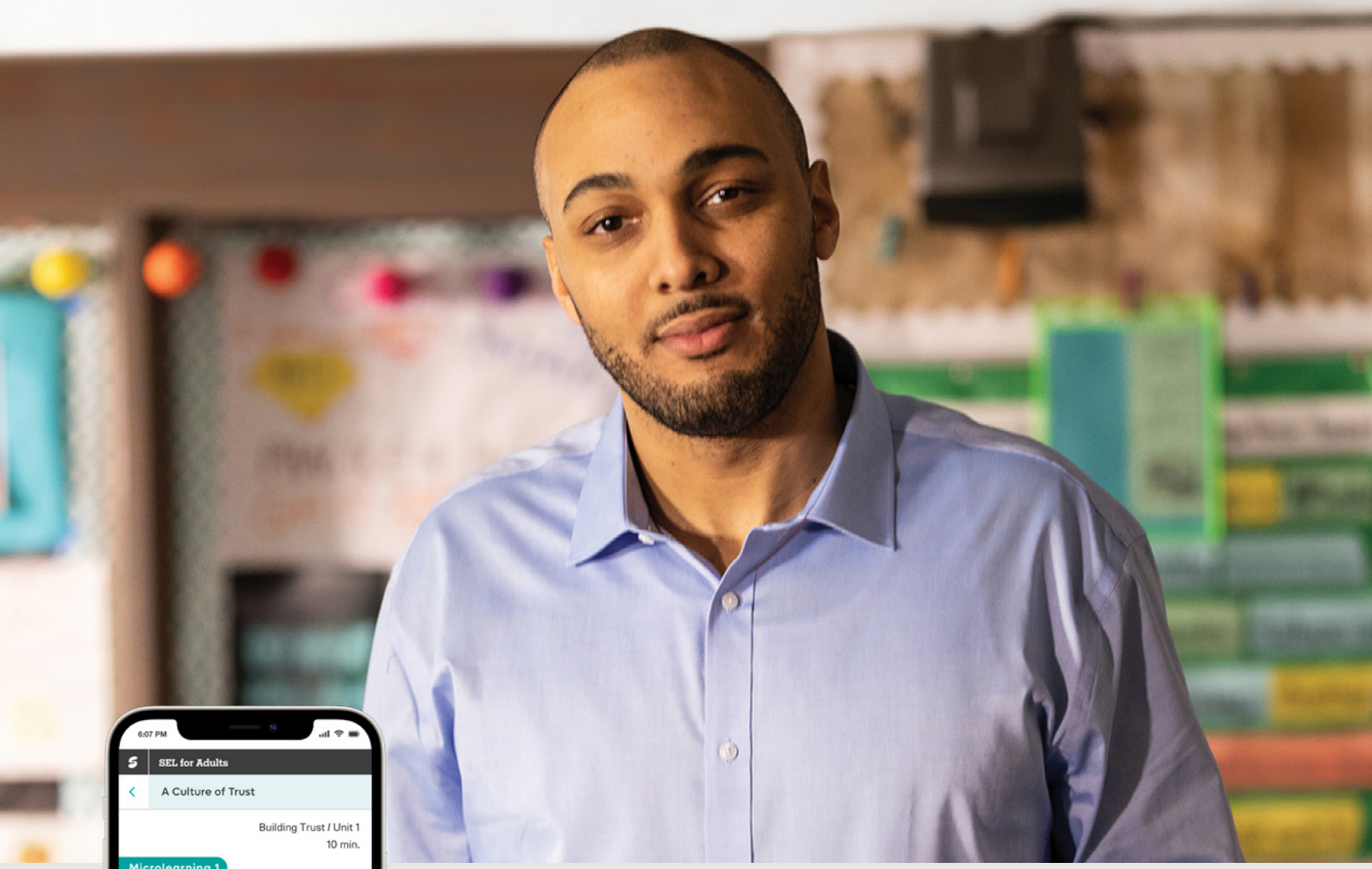

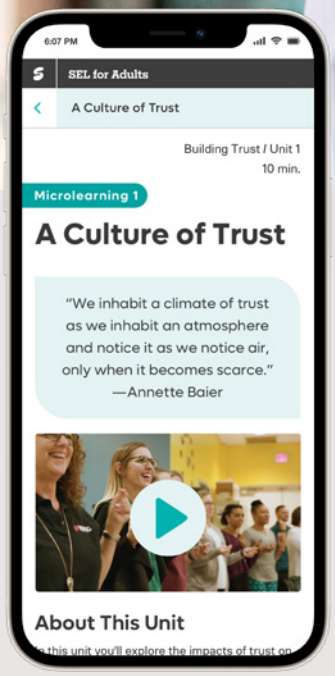

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Nurturing Well-Being in Schools

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SUMMER 2022

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Clearing "Waste" from Classrooms

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Responding to Intolerance: Leadership for a Multiracial Democracy

John Rogers & Joseph Kahne

A survey reveals four responses school leaders typically have toward conflict—but one rises above the rest for success.

Coming this Fall in *Educational Leadership*

September

Strengthening School-Family Partnerships

Learn ways to improve family engagement at a critical time and build on relationships to work through conflict, support student growth, and strengthen learning initiatives.

October

The Education Profession: Changing the Narrative

Gain insight and ideas on improving educators' career satisfaction, professional status, and sense of efficacy as schools recover from the disruption of the pandemic.

November

The Self-Directed Learner

Explore strategies to support independent learning and engagement and help students take greater ownership of their own learning.

Podcast: A New Lens on Teacher Burnout

Author and instructional coach Chase Mielke discusses how schools can do a better job of addressing the underlying, organizational causes of teacher burnout—and how educators can use this summer to identify approaches and practices that will reduce overload and improve efficacy.

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Readers React

April 2022 | *Feedback for Impact*

Love (or dislike) something in a recent issue of EL? We want to hear about it! Write to us at edleadership@ascd.org or on Twitter @ELmagazine. Printed reactions may be edited for clarity and length.

To explore past issues of *Educational Leadership*, go to: https://www.ascd.org/el.

The Curiosity Cure
One of the best articles I've read in EL magazine ["Approaching Observations as a Curious Colleague" by Sean Conner and Jennifer Froehle].

Patrick Tiernan (@PatrickTiernan)

What's Good for Students...
Great summary of the research on the kinds of feedback that improve teaching. ["What Teachers Really Want When It Comes to Feedback" by Thomas R. Guskey and Laura L. Link.] If we want healthy, meaningful cultures of feedback for students, why wouldn't we commit to the same for educators?

Eric Hudson (@ejhudson)

An Engaging Article
This is great. ["Why Do Students Disengage?" column by Nancy Fisher and Douglas Frey.] There are so many reasons why it may be hard for students to focus and give their all into what they are learning. Teachers should always be aware of every reason and should know how to go about helping the student.

Grace Martini (@teachergracem)

When Feedback Is the Culture
Great article! ["Creating a Culture of Feedback".] Dr. Sanée Bell reminds us that as instructional leaders one of the most important jobs is to serve as a *coach*. The three ingredients for feedback mentioned are a launch point for any instructional leader who is trying to fine-tune their coaching craft.

Marcos Lopez (@MarcosL59082962)

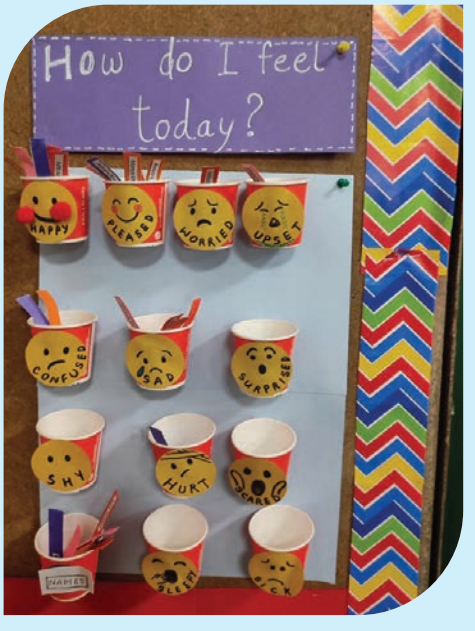
Better Rubrics, Anyone?
Another great article from this issue! ["How to Provide Better Feedback Through Rubrics" by Jay McTighe and Tony Frontier.] Meta-explanations of feedback through quality rubrics. Great seeing the work of the great Grant Wiggins thread through this issue.

Patrick Tiernan (@PatrickTiernan)

A Reliable Coaching Method
[The coaching method described in "Better Methods for Video-Based Instructional Coaching" by Abby Reisman and coauthors, online exclusive] is so authentic and the most reliable method through which educators can easily get a deep analysis of coaching conversations and efficiency.

GK Shahani (@GKLovesYou)

Filling Their Cups with Emotion



How educators approach SEL.

Pratibha Pal (@Pratibh54496744)

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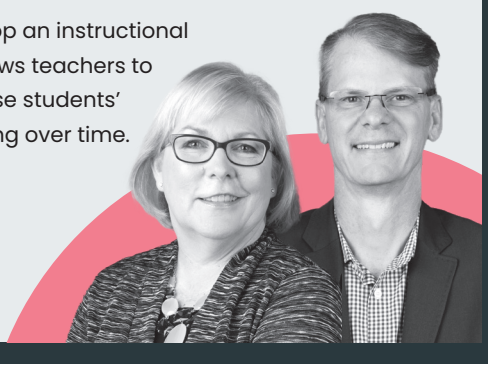

From Leadership to Buildership

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with ASCD author and content expert Robyn R. Jackson

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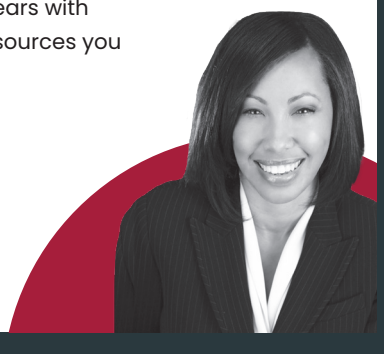

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- Differentiated Instruction
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Anthony Rebora

Beyond Lip Service on School Well-Being

As most educators can attest, the growing push around well-being in schools is not a new phenomenon. Several ongoing priorities in K–12 education—such as social-emotional learning, whole child education, trauma-sensitive schooling, and equity—center on aspects of well-being and the need to move beyond narrow conceptions of school success. Even the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, signed in 2015, broadened school accountability systems to include measures of school climate and wellness.

But things have gotten more urgent now. The pandemic, with its attendant disruptions and hardships, created new pressures and traumas for students and educators alike—many of which are still rumbling. It has strained school resources and personnel, while revealing gaps in systemic supports and problems in long-prevailing conventions. As in other industries, it has made many people reassess their priorities in the interests of greater balance and personal health.

In this context, many educators believe, school systems can no longer afford to pay lip service to the importance of well-being or offer fragmentary programs or initiatives. Well-being must become an integral part of what they do.

Making that happen won't be easy, but there are places to start. This special online-only issue of *Educational Leadership*—available free to all readers—is designed to help educators and school leaders think through and discuss possibilities and new paradigms. The articles outline specific shifts, both large and small, schools can make to support students and teachers more holistically and ingrain wellness and care more deeply into their organizational fabrics.

Well-being must become an integral part of what schools do.

Here are some key ideas to think about as you read the issue:

Build belonging and connection. Several of the articles underscore the importance of belonging and connection to students' sense of psychological safety and ability to learn. These qualities can be elusive for many students if schools are not intentionally cultivating them. For this reason, instructional practices and school climate norms alike need to be run through the "filter" of relationship building.

Burnout is an "ecosystem" problem. Another recurrent theme is that, when it comes to supporting teachers, relying on self-help or self-preservation strategies is not enough. Schools need to do a better job of recognizing and addressing the *organizational causes of educator burnout*. This means not only working to create more connective and emotionally supportive professional communities, but also taking steps to reduce barriers to educator efficacy. These include initiative overload, poor professional learning, and time-sucking nonessential tasks and interruptions.

Student voice matters. True well-being in schools, write Catharine Biddle, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Mark Tappan, requires that "we listen to students and trust them as experts on their own experience, and that we engage them as full and active partners in school and community transformation." As these and other authors argue, we need to create more opportunities in the curriculum and in school day for student voice, autonomy, and control. (Likewise for teachers.)

Make time and space for well-being. "If we care about student [and teacher] well-being, we must show that it matters," writes Cathy Vatterott. This means school well-being initiatives must amount to more than good intentions or lofty mission statements. Instead, schools need to create dedicated time and room for well-being in their programming, organizational structures, and physical spaces. Examples include reconfiguring daily schedules to slow the pace, providing access to meaningful mental health services, and boosting opportunities for play and stress relief.

The bonus, of course, is that none of these ideas is separate from academic achievement. As the authors in this issue remind us, they are absolutely integral to it.

What's NEW?

PLAN AHEAD

for the Next School Year

Students Taking Action Together: 5 Teaching Techniques to Cultivate SEL, Civic Engagement, and a Healthy Democracy

Lauren M. Fullmer, Laura F. Bond, Crystal N. Molyneaux, Samuel J. Nayman, and Maurice J. Elias

Researchers from the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab share their field-tested approach for developing the critical thinking, social-emotional, problem-solving, and discussion skills students need to be effective changemakers.

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Cultivating Joyful Learning Spaces for Black Girls: Insights into Interrupting School Pushout

Monique W. Morris

Combining her own research and experiences with thoughtful conversations with other educators and clinical practitioners, the author provides essential takeaways for all educators who are committed to building learning environments that support Black girls' excellence and academic achievement.

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Leading Your School Toward Equity: A Practical Framework for Walking the Talk

Dwayne Chism

Veteran educator Dwayne Chism shows district, school, and teacher leaders a four-step process for taking equity work beyond talk and into effective action, with an array of professional development activities, leadership tips, and downloadable tools.

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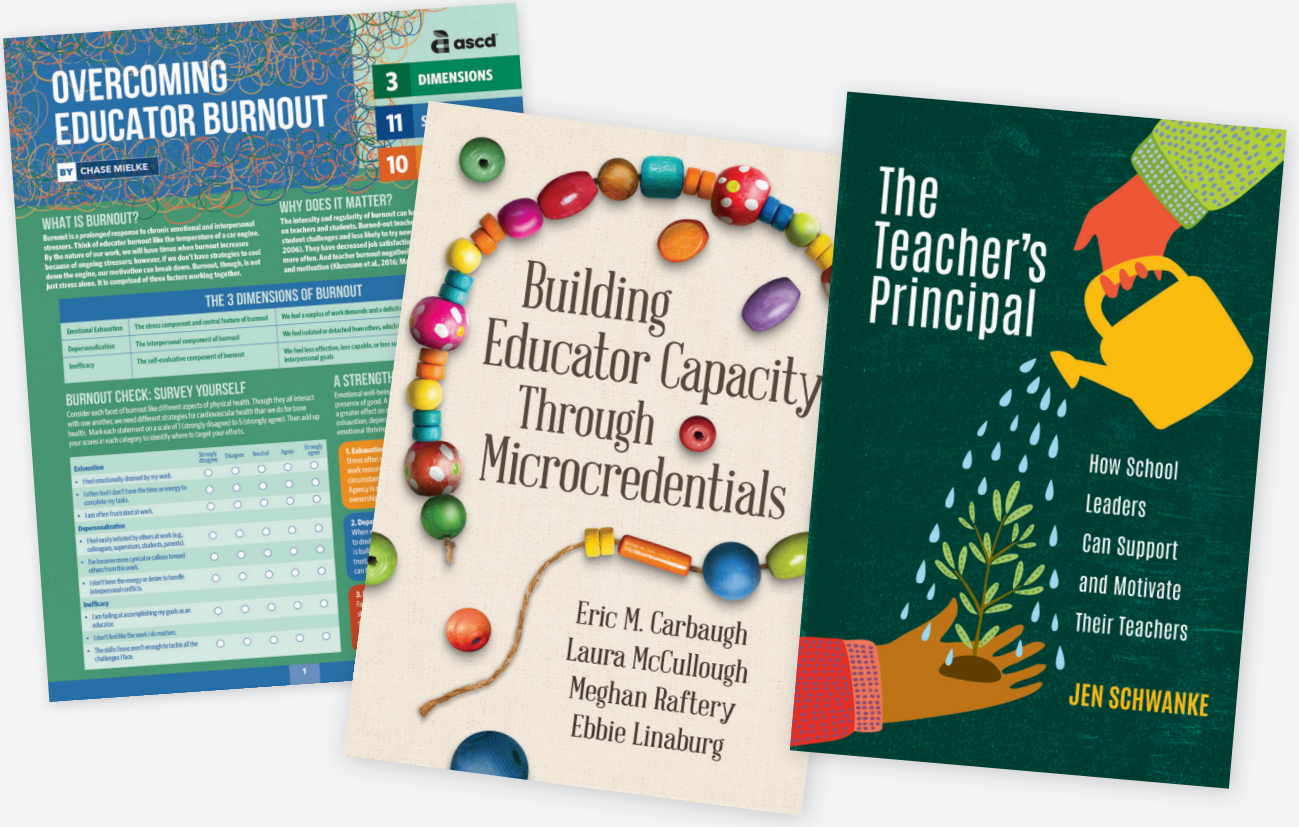

Overcoming Educator Burnout (Quick Reference Guide)

Chase Mielke

Stress is a normal part of teaching, but it doesn't take much for stress to turn into burnout. This quick reference guide identifies what factors lead to burnout and how educators can combat them in their everyday work life.

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ISBN 978-1-4166-3144-6

Building Educator Capacity Through Microcredentials

Eric M. Carbaugh, Laura McCullough, Meghan Raftery, and Ebbie Linaburg

Demystify microcredentialing and learn how to take advantage of this powerful approach to professional learning. Readers will acquire the information and tools to launch and scale an effective microcredentialing program that meets staff professional development needs and improves students' learning outcomes.

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The Teacher's Principal: How School Leaders Can Support and Motivate Their Teachers

Jen Schwanke

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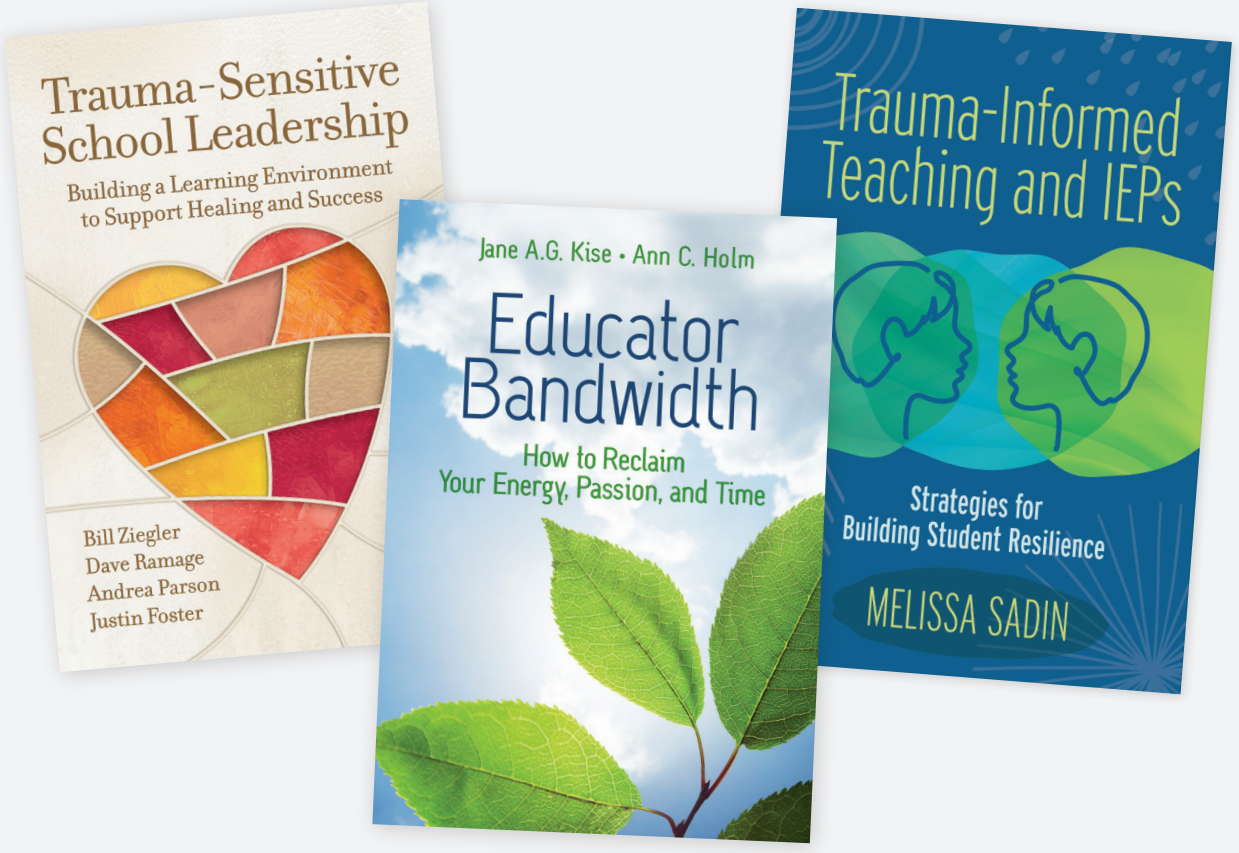

Trauma-Sensitive School Leadership: Building a Learning Environment to Support Healing and Success

Bill Ziegler, Dave Ramage, Andrea Parson, and Justin Foster

We've heard about implementing "trauma-sensitive" practices that help students heal and succeed. But what does this look like? Don't miss this practical framework and 50 concrete strategies for creating a learning environment that better serves and supports students living with trauma.

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Educator Bandwidth: How to Reclaim Your Energy, Passion, and Time

Jane A. G. Kise and Ann C. Holm

It's time to make your mental bandwidth work for you. The authors combine neuroscience research with their own extensive experience working with educators to share effective strategies and habits that help you manage your mental bandwidth and prioritize drains on mental energy.

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Melissa Sadin

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COMING SOON

24 Instructional Strategies Every Teacher Should Know (Quick Reference Guide)

Bryan Goodwin and Kristin Rouleau

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Laurie Barron and Patti Kinney on the Power of Belonging

Laurie Barron and Patti Kinney are the coauthors of We Belong: 50 Strategies to Create Community and Revolutionize Classroom Management (ASCD, 2021). *Barron is the superintendent of Evergreen School District in Kalispell, Montana, and was the 2021 Montana Superintendent of the Year. She has taught and led schools at the middle and high school level. Kinney, a former middle school teacher and principal, presents and consults nationally on middle-level education. She is past president of the Association for Middle Level Education and was the 2003 Oregon Principal of the Year. A key part of their book's message is that teachers can foster students' well-being and learning through practices that create a cohesive classroom community and help all students feel like they belong. With many students—and schools—readjusting to in-person classrooms and recovering from the stress and uncertainty of going through a pandemic, laying the groundwork for a sense of belonging for all is especially important going into the 2022–2023 school year.*

Classroom management, engagement, academic work—everything goes better when approached through the lens of belonging.

Laurie Barron

Patti Kinney

What does it mean for a student to have a feeling of *belonging*?

Laurie Barron: People sometimes underestimate the power of belonging, of what it means to feel that you matter, that you are valued, seen, and heard. And, because a sense of belonging comes more naturally for some students than others, teachers must make intentional efforts to ensure that *all* students, not just those for whom it comes easily, know that they belong, that they have a place in *their* class and *their* school.

Patti Kinney: Think about a situation you've found yourself in when you

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAURIE BARRON AND PATTI KINNEY

When students feel their voices are heard and honored, it has a significant impact on their willingness to engage, participate, accept and include others' voices, put forth effort, and improve their own outcomes.

felt uncomfortable, awkward, and out of place. Sadly, that's what far too many of our students feel when they enter their school or classroom. At the very least, for students to feel a sense of belonging, they must feel physically and emotionally safe; learn in an environment where behavioral and academic expectations are clearly communicated, equitably enforced, and completely supported; and be offered opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, and feedback without fear of reprisal.

Your research found connections between classroom management styles and how much belonging students feel. What key elements are needed in classroom management to help students feel part of a community?

PK: Educators need to truly believe that belonging impacts classroom management. They need to run their instructional and management practices through that filter. Do their words and actions promote or diminish the chances that a student will belong? Do they treat all students equitably, and with respect and dignity? Most students would rather be seen as disruptive than undignified, and if they feel they are backed into a corner, they can become defiant and disruptive.

Belonging can flourish when educators model the behaviors expected from students, focus on the positive, use humor when appropriate, and choose the path of least resistance. By that I mean asking themselves, "What's the *smallest* action I can take now to deal with this disruptive student?"

LB: Clarity and consistency are key. More often than we'd like, students get off track and distracted when the teacher's instructions lack clear and concise directions. When directions are unclear, students can not only get off task, but can also feel lost or unsure. This decreases the likelihood they feel they belong and are part of the community of learners—particularly if others seem to understand the directions (even if they actually don't). When teachers aren't consistent, a feeling arises in some students of "What will my teacher expect today?" or "Will I be treated fairly?" Consistency directly impacts students' trust and belief in us—and thus their sense of overall classroom community. Community is also a cornerstone of belonging. Teachers must get to know their students and help students get to know each other, to help build a sense of community.

Middle school is the area you both specialize in, and many people seem to feel middle school is its own animal! What's different about nurturing well-being with middle school-age students?

PK: I love middle schoolers; it's my favorite age group. Yes, young adolescents can be compassionate, chaotic, caring, and confused—often all within a short time frame. They need educators who love and appreciate them. When I dealt with management issues as a teacher or

Middle schoolers are interesting and full of positive energy! Capitalizing on all these positive traits is much easier when we remember that we are teaching *middle schoolers*, whose executive functioning is not yet complete.

an administrator, I always asked myself if the behavior seemed to stem from childish irresponsibility or out-and-out defiance. The key to determining the difference is how well you know the student. If the behavior is minor, unusual, or out of the ordinary for the student, it probably leans toward childish irresponsibility. Defiance usually involves times when a student directly challenges authority, refuses to follow directions in an outspoken manner, engages in name-calling, or makes a scene, etc. Which way I answered myself made a difference in how I dealt with the situation.

It's critical to remember that, from its earliest conception, the middle school model was designed to revolve around *teaming*—a group of multidisciplinary teachers working together with the same group of students. Team meetings for teachers were built into schedules so the social, emotional, and academic needs of a group of students or students' individual needs could be discussed, and an action plan developed.

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This model was specifically developed to nurture the well-being of adolescent students—both in academic growth and personal development. Sadly, many districts have moved away from this model, making it more difficult to provide the nurturing middle schoolers need.

LB: Make no mistake: middle schoolers are fun, interesting, and full of positive energy! Capitalizing on all these positive traits is much easier when we remember that we are teaching *middle schoolers*, young adolescents whose executive functioning is not yet complete. While we must hold students accountable, we must also realize that we need to nurture middle school students a little differently from their adolescent peers in high school, for example. When students forget their homework, wait until the last minute to complete tasks, have difficulty finishing assignments, are easily distracted, have difficulty controlling impulses, and make inappropriate comments without thinking, we need to help support them in working through these issues instead of jumping into an immediate negative response toward very natural behavior.

What key things can teachers do early in the year to create class cohesiveness?

LB: A big part of cohesiveness, of "forming a united whole," is helping students get to know each other. I recall when I was teaching 12th grade AP English and two students were discussing a book. One student told the other that they had talked about that book in their English class the previous year together, but the other student didn't even realize he had sat behind her in that class. It seems almost unbelievable. Students need activities to help them get to know each other—student-to-student introductions, icebreakers, and intentional seating assignments (changed regularly so all students can get to know each other)—no matter their age.

Young adolescents are caring, chaotic, and confused, often all within the same time frame.

PK: Relationships, and thus cohesiveness, also grow out of working together. So, early in the year, do a school or community service-learning project together and infuse group work into your teaching strategies. As the year goes on, try things like creating a mural that illustrates what the class has been studying, or holding regular class meetings to discuss student concerns or school issues as they arise.

Don't forget to let the students get to know *you*. Tell them what you were like as a student and what you thought about the subject(s) you are currently teaching. Ask their advice on how to best raise your new pet, or what's a good restaurant to check out. Let them see there's more to you than just being a teacher.

What do you mean by the concept of "academic belonging"?

LB: Few elements of effective classroom management are as impactful as quality,

The trick is to think of practices that promote belonging as *content* and embed them in the lessons you will already be teaching.

engaging instruction, particularly when this instruction is provided in a safe, supportive environment that offers opportunities for pre-teaching, reteaching, and redos when appropriate. For a student, feeling like you "get it," are "smart," and have the ability to succeed is essential to belonging and feeling safe in any classroom.

When we give students only a single chance to get it right (teach it, assess it, and move on), we're often missing so many students who have the potential and capacity to learn but just need more time or different opportunities to do so. It's easy to dismiss a student's lack of a particular skill or their poor performance as something out of our control, but when we reflect on what we *can* control (our own behavior and the opportunities we provide students), we can often find ways to ensure students have more chances to learn content and not simply be exposed to it.

One procedure that can help students know what to expect consistently is posting the agenda for that day on the board for students to see in every class. When students know what is going to happen in class each day, they are less likely to feel "lost" or confused about expectations, and their sense of belonging increases. We suggest this agenda include: the date, a student-friendly statement of the relevant standard you are teaching to that day, an essential question about the standard, a summary of the day's topics/plan, and a list of upcoming activities and assignments (with due dates).

PK: Regardless of the age of students you're teaching, there will be a wide range in cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. To promote belonging, as lessons are developed, teachers must take these differences into account. For students to feel that sense of belonging, it's important to not only provide the high-quality instruction that Laurie mentions, but to also utilize a variety of instructional methods. Teachers who rely primarily on one instructional style—whether it's lecture, cooperative learning, Socratic questioning, or others—run the risk of diminishing a student's sense of belonging and academic success. Early in the year, once you have a sense of your students' learning preferences, establish a way to work into your planning a rotation of different instructional techniques so you regularly use methods that vary in terms of individual versus group work, presentation styles, higher-order thinking skills (concrete versus abstract), assessment methods, and so forth.

You stress giving students input into decisions schoolwide as part of making a school a place of belonging. What things can school *leaders* do, or set up early in the school year, to give students more "voice"?

LB: We don't "give" students a voice; we work to honor their voices. When students feel their voices are heard and honored, it has a significant impact on their willingness to engage, participate, accept and include others' voices, put forth effort, and improve their own outcomes.

One way to establish a culture that honors student voice is through setting up a student

leadership council. When I was a principal, we had a council of 10 students per grade level, representing a variety of students (different genders, races, backgrounds, academic abilities, behavior, and attendance). These students participated in monthly training and feedback sessions that helped improve different aspects of their middle school, from procedures for changing classes to overall operations. They took ownership of *their* school when we listened to and honored *their* voices. Their sense of belonging was certainly positively impacted. It's important for all students to have leadership experiences like this at some point.

PK: A piece of advice I've always tried to follow is that when a decision needs to be made, involve those most directly impacted by the decision. Years ago, I had the opportunity to have a playground structure built at the middle school I led. I really wanted this project to be successful because I had had some pushback on it—not everyone thought it was appropriate for a middle school and some feared it would go unused. I pulled together a group of students and invited the head of the company we were using to talk with them. He gave some guidelines, shared what would be possible within our budget, and left the students with catalogs to examine. They pored over the catalogs and came up with a list of playground items they felt would appeal to a variety of students. Using their list, a structure was designed and built. When school opened, the kids absolutely swarmed that structure. Kid designed, kid used!

In terms of classroom practices that foster belonging, you advise "thinking of procedures as content." What does that mean?

PK: When we talk about this topic, teachers often say, "I have way too much content to cover as it is; I don't have time to add anything else to my lessons!" The trick is to think of practices

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that promote belonging as *content* and embed them in the lessons you will already be teaching. In our new book, we provide a long list of skills and practices that increase belonging (available as a downloadable handout on ASCD's website). For example, one skill is "learn and practice organizational and planning skills." A teacher can embed this skill into his or her lessons for students. Another is "practice kindness and helpfulness." It's very easy to begin a lesson that requires group work by saying something like, "As you work on this assignment, please be kind and help each other out."

—*Naomi Thiers*

Editor's note: This interview has been edited for space.

Educator Well-Being 2.0

Teacher burnout is an organizational problem, not an individual one.

Chase Mielke

Ashlee is a veteran teacher at a Title 1 elementary school. Despite the many challenges her students experience, her students meet or exceed grade-level growth goals. She holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, is consistently rated as a highly effective teacher, and has received a county "outstanding educator" award. She is compassionate. Kind. Creative. Intelligent.

And she's burning out—considering each day whether she wants to stay in education.

She also happens to be my wife.

CHEE SIONG TEH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

If we really want to reduce burnout, it will take more than exercise routines, meditation apps, and free donuts in the staff lounge. Much more.

I travel and present to educators all over the world about educator burnout, highlighting the research-based strategies that have helped me and tens of thousands of educators strengthen their well-being.

So why is my wife—a phenomenal teacher—burning out? She has access to a guy who can cite and teach ad nauseam the strategies that lead to increased gratitude, purpose, and joy. I can do a deep dive on why exercise, mindfulness, and forgiveness boost our physical and emotional health. I can help her spot every cognitive distortion that arises and smite it with a research-based reframe. But it's not enough.

Because burnout isn't about the individual—it's about the organization. It is an issue of *context*, not *character*.

My wife is a testament to how educators and school leaders—myself included—have misunderstood burnout, placing the onus on teachers via "self-care solutions." If we *really* want to reduce burnout, though, it will take more than exercise routines, meditation apps, and free donuts in the staff lounge. More than cognitive reframes and mindfulness strategies. Much more.

Let's start with a better understanding of what leads to teacher burnout.

The Computer Analogy

For perspective, it's helpful to consider teacher burnout through the lens of a computer (see fig. 1), a concept I explore in greater depth in my forthcoming ASCD book, a guide for school leaders on reducing staff burnout and increasing retention. Obligatory caveat that teachers—humans—are much more complicated than computers (and can't be replaced by them). But this analogy helps us understand the many factors that play into a burned-out teacher.

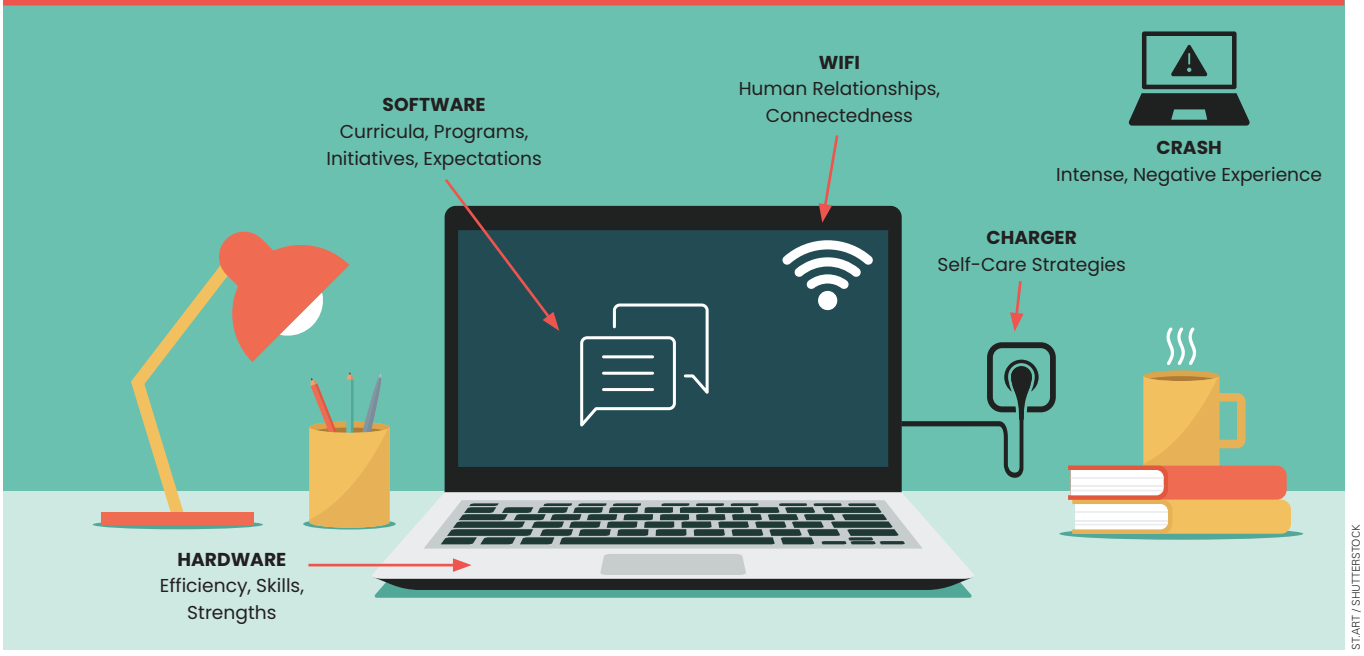
The Charger: Self-Care Strategies

One of the first efforts school leaders use to support staff well-being is promoting self-care. Exercise competitions, meditation websites, wellness workshops. This seems like the logical move: The teacher is burning out, so fix the teacher. But asking teachers to fix their burnout is like asking a seed to grow better when the soil is dry and the sun is nowhere to be found.

Of course, we shouldn't ignore the importance of self-care: Educators benefit when they use research-based practices to improve their well-being (Mielke, 2019). We need energy and motivation just to "turn on" our skills.

However, self-care is like the charger and battery of a computer: A teacher can practice all the self-care strategies in the world—be fully charged—but energy will be zapped if the hardware is damaged or too much software is running simultaneously. Our experience with holiday and summer breaks points to this: If we recharge when we're away from work but quickly lose energy without another break on the horizon (think "February Funk"), then working conditions are driving burnout—not a lack of self-care strategies. Put differently, we have to address the systems, policies, and conditions that "drain batteries" so quickly and reliably. We have to look at the software and hardware.

FIGURE 1. The Computer Analogy of Staff Well-Being



Software: Curricula, Programs, Initiatives, Expectations

Running too much software at once is a surefire way to crash or slow a computer. If we want to avoid draining the battery on our computers or phones, we close out programs we're not using—or even delete the ones that are no longer serving a purpose. We also know that the fewer programs we have running, the better the performance on each one—whether we're talking about computers or educators. The key questions school leaders should ask are: How many programs are we running at a time? How inefficient are our systems because we're running too much at once?

Work overload is the biggest cause of emotional exhaustion, the first major dimension of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2014). I've seen this process unfold with my wife. She recently showed me all the scripted curriculum guides she has to use in her elementary school—seven in total, three brand new. Her day is mapped out nearly to the minute, with a note from administration reading, "You won't have time for a scheduled snack, so try to build one in with your students while they work." In my wife's words, "I feel like I have no time to do the things that made me love teaching."

Unfortunately, too many schools try to fix problems by doing more with more, rather than more with less.

Hardware: Efficacy, Skills, Strengths

OK, maybe you *have* to run a few initiatives at the same time to try to make gains. If so, you'll need to boost the hardware to keep up with the energy and focus demands. Just as improving computer hardware takes more time and expense than adding software and programs, improving the hardware of educators is a deeper commitment. It takes high-quality coaching, feedback, and positive support.

Along with emotional exhaustion, inefficacy is another major dimension of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2014). Building efficacy requires more than confidence-boosting mantras like, "You

got this!" and "We value you!" It requires mastery experiences: Competence attained through high-quality professional development and timely, constructive feedback in safe, supportive environments. If we want teachers to persevere through challenges, we need to create conditions that build efficacy: that involves coaching, time, and support.

WIFI: *Human Relationships, Connectedness*

Just as we value technology to connect to the outside world—to learn, to transmit, to bond—high-quality teaching requires connection. And this means authentic, positive human relationships between every stakeholder—staff, administration, students, and community members. Cynicism (often called "depersonalization") is the third and final dimension of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2014). It involves negativity and pessimism, particularly involving *people*. Education is a highly social endeavor; when relationships are strained or cultures are toxic, the whole system suffers. Of course, we can use computers without WIFI, but our work and access might be impeded. Similarly, teachers *can* teach without strong connections, but their motivation and performance are vastly diminished.

Troubleshooting the System Failures

When a computer is broken, we look beyond just its battery or the charger to diagnose and resolve the issues. Likewise, let's look beyond self-care strategies to reduce teacher burnout and increase retention. Here are a few key moves school leaders can make.

Tip #1: *Run System Diagnostics*

The most important place to start with burnout is assessing its causes. Engage a "curiosity mindset" and seek a better sense of what's driving burnout: Is it exhaustion from too many initiatives (software)? The need for greater skills and capacity (hardware)? A lack of opportunity to build positive connections with students and colleagues (WIFI)?

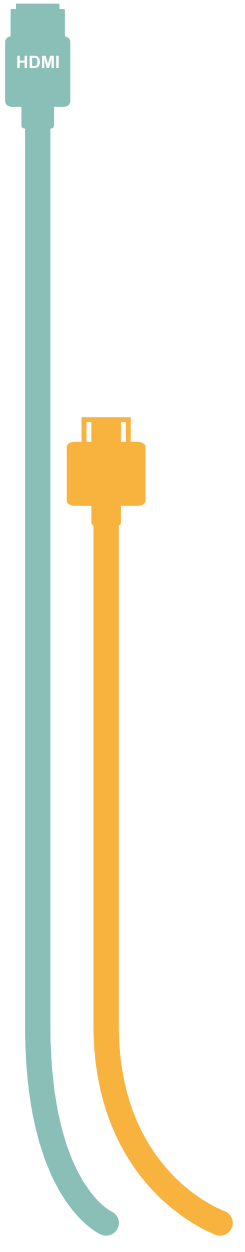
To help teachers to persevere through challenges, we need to create conditions that build efficacy: coaching, time, and support.

To get high-quality feedback from staff, use high-quality questions to survey staff (e.g., Don't just ask, "What's stressing you out right now?"). Thankfully, validated measures already exist for these surveys, such as Mind Garden's Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS). These assessments help identify the extent of burnout within an organization and its central causes. (Here's a sample inventory to try.)

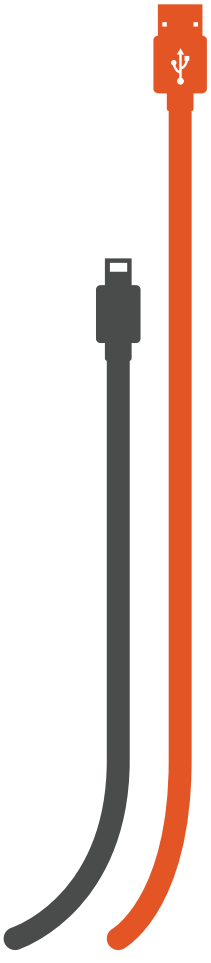
Too often we use self-care as a solution because we don't know the true cause of burnout. Ask what your staff's experience is with their working conditions. Listen to their answers. Practice getting "undefensive." And work collaboratively on ways to make your school a place where people thrive.

Tip #2: *Reboot the CPU*

If you've ever experienced a computer crashing in the middle of a project or task, you know how devastating it can be: Memory is lost, programs need to reload, or the system itself might require a massive reboot or new hardware. Educators crash whenever there is an intense threat to their



One of the best ways to reduce initiative fatigue is to focus on *practices* instead of *programs*.



safety and security. School safety threats, a screaming parent, seeing a colleague let go—all of these can cause a crash. When these things happen, prioritize the CPU.

■ *Clear communication*. Speak candidly and directly with educators in person to reduce miscommunication. For instance, if there was a recent threat to school safety, assemble your educators together and speak directly about what happened, what the next steps are, and what the school team is doing to ensure safety is a priority.

■ *Protection*. Make sure educators know they are safe and secure. If a teacher is verbally abused by a parent, for example, intervene ASAP and make sure all future communication from the parent goes through you, the school leader.

■ *Uplifting emotions*. Provide staff members individualized praise, practice gratitude, and show compassion. Write a personalized thank-you note acknowledging a teacher's resilience. If your school suffers a tragedy, check in one-on-one with as many of your staff members as possible. Lead your staff through adversities by leveraging human relatedness.

Tip #3: Close Out Software

As a part of our school improvement process, our district took inventory of all the initiatives we've started in the last few years. The number? Forty. That's right. Forty initiatives for a school district of 150 certified teaching staff. There are diminishing returns to adding new things without freeing up time and effort to do existing things really well (something our school improvement team realized looking at our district's list). As school leaders, we should ask ourselves, are we doing too many things with mediocrity rather than a few things with excellence?

One of the best ways to reduce initiative fatigue is to focus on *practices* instead of *programs*. Before implementing any new initiative—or as you evaluate existing initiatives—work with your team on these questions:

■ What is the desired outcome of the program/initiative?

■ What 3–5 practices would we see as evidence of implementation?

■ What do staff members gain by implementing these practices?

■ What roadblocks might stall the habituation of these practices?

■ How will we support the *initial* implementation of these practices?

■ How will we monitor and support *ongoing* implementation of these practices?

Through this process, you might realize that (a) you don't *need* a new program, (b) you already have the skills and people necessary to achieve the desired outcome, and/or (c) previous programs aren't necessary and you can discontinue them in service of coaching—mastering existing practices rather than adopting packaged programs.

Tip #4: Invest in New Hardware

You don't have to know much about computers to know that swapping out the hardware is a big investment that takes time and expertise. It's not as simple as, say, downloading a new app. Building

teacher efficacy is the same: If we want teachers to have greater skills to tackle initiatives or the challenges of teaching, we need to devote ample time and resources to help them be successful. We do this via high-quality coaching.

Skill-building requires more than sporadic check-ins with administrators during evaluations. No matter how sophisticated your current coaching systems are, look for ways to bolster them.

■ *Create true coaching positions*. Identify your top teachers and mentors—especially those interested in coaching—and give them ample support and time (more than one hour a day) to provide peer coaching. To avoid work overload, don't just give someone the responsibility of coaching without the dedicated time to do it. Consider full-time coaching positions—a possible career track for those who don't want to pursue the principalship. Build a team of coaches from within and honor coaching as more than just a "nice-to-have."

■ *Make coaching non-evaluative*. "Coaching" is a four-letter word in many schools because it is used as a response to poor evaluations. Draw a clear line in the sand that coaching roles and experiences will have nothing to do with evaluative conversations. When an administrator has concerns over a teacher's performance, bring the coach in only *after* the administrator and teacher have agreed upon an instructional goal. Develop policies of confidentiality between coaches and coachees.

■ *Develop informal peer-coaching opportunities*. If you can't create new roles, dedicate ample PD time for staff to help peers set goals, observe each other, and provide feedback. Use video for teachers to watch their own and each other's teaching more objectively.

■ *Use established systems*. Masters of coaching have done the heavy lifting, so rather than building a coaching system from scratch, use what works. Jim Knight's Impact Cycle (2018) is among the most powerful systems I have seen and used. It provides structured conversations, leverages objective data, and is adaptable to any school's needs. Most of all, it respects and empowers teachers—both of which are critical to improving educator well-being.

Investing in new hardware takes time and energy. However, if we invest in practices and skills—and we close out other "software" that burdens our time and energy—we help our staff develop the efficacy and skills needed to handle new challenges. We foster collaborative, confident communities. And we show our staff that we value people over programs.

Systems Built to Thrive

The past few years have challenged us *beyond* what self-care strategies can fix. Pandemic teaching put a strain on our efficacy and skills. Initiatives stopped, restarted, and got added to our plates as we scrambled to teach in this new era. Our connectedness took hits as distances grew physically (with remote schooling) and emotionally (with political divides).

Yet, these past few years have pushed us to help our systems work at their best. Let's also help our *staff* work at their best. Let's revamp our organizations to reduce the conditions of burnout. For the sake of our students. For the sake of our colleagues. For the sake of amazing teachers like my wife.

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Chase Mielke is an instructional coach, speaker, and author of *The Burnout Cure: Learning to Love Teaching Again* (ASCD, 2019) and the QRG *Overcoming Educator Burnout* (ASCD, 2022). Follow him on Twitter.

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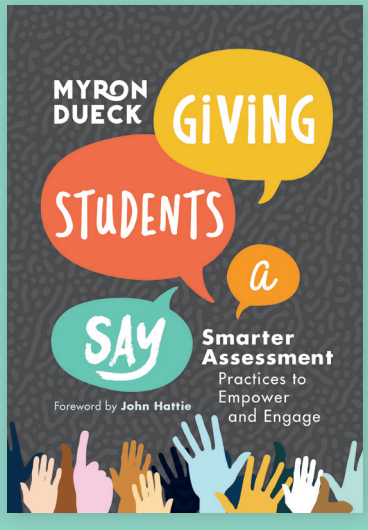

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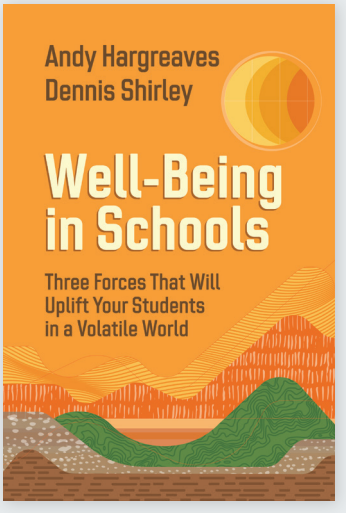

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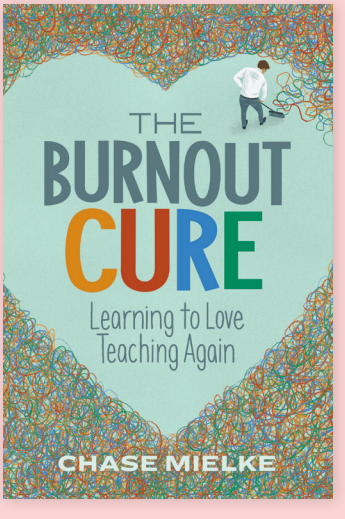

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Chase Mielke

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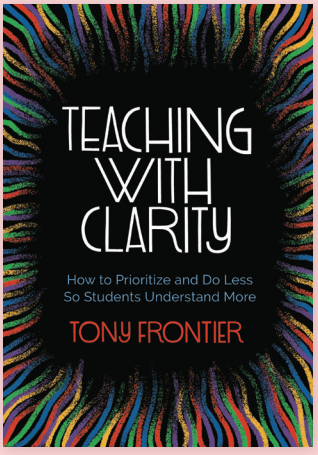

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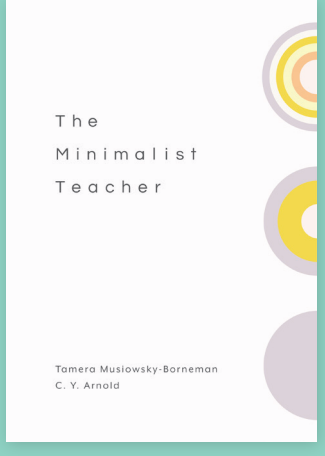

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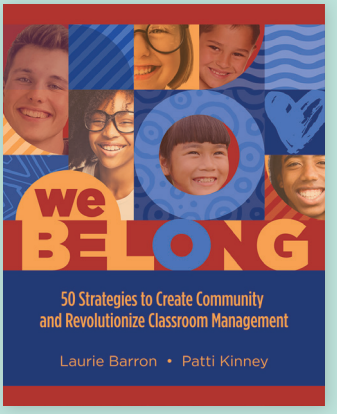

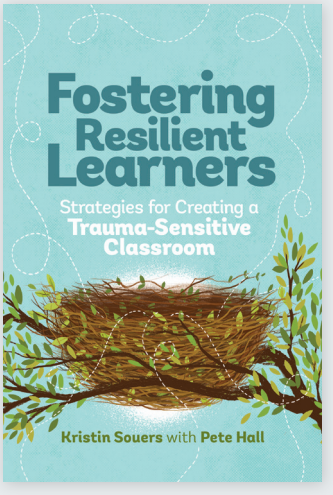

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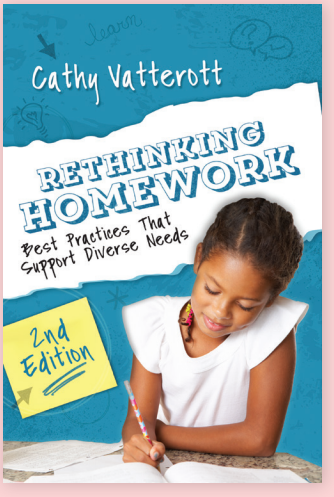

Lessons on Student Well-Being From "The Great Resignation"

During the pandemic, many people rethought their priorities. We need to rethink students' needs as well.

Cathy Vatterott

Over the last year, I watched the "great resignation" with fascination. In the last half of 2021, more than 20 million people quit their jobs (CBS News, 2022). The pandemic, like a cosmic whack on the head, caused nearly everyone to rethink, well, nearly everything. As workers reconsidered their priorities and the relative value of their jobs, they were awakened to the importance of family, friends, and both physical and mental health. As a result, millions of people decided their jobs were "just not worth it" (CBS News, 2022). The pandemic had awakened a focus on what psychologists have long defined as basic human

JACOBLUND / iSTOCK

needs—autonomy, flexibility, and control (Glasser, 1992; Hari, 2018).

When workers shared what they liked about their new jobs, autonomy, flexibility, and control were invariably part of the package. For educators, it's important to ask: Don't our students deserve these things, too? Our students have the same human needs that those workers—and all of us—have, and their well-being is contingent on meeting those basic needs. To be well, students need autonomy, flexibility, and control, yet so many of our school practices restrict student autonomy and prioritize compliance over engagement, competition over relationships, and academics over mental health.

When school culture becomes hyper-focused on achievement and test scores, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of students' social and emotional well-being. Although most schools have implemented some form of social-emotional learning, stress reduction techniques such as mindfulness only do so much if the school's culture is a major contributor to student stress.

Now is a good time to reflect on our school practices and the messages they send to students, rethink our priorities, and broaden our definition of student success. If we want to recalibrate the metric for student success from what Fullan (2021) calls "academic obsession" to focus more on well-being, we need to put well-being on equal footing with academic achievement. Some (including Fullan) would say well-being must be a *higher* priority than academics.

If we care about student well-being, we must show that it matters. What school practices might be changed or implemented that would facilitate student wellness? Here are four places to start—based on those human needs we've identified during this time of "great resignation."

The "great resignation" should be our cue to initiate a "great reset" in our school practices.

1 Give students more autonomy in learning.

In a traditional teacher-directed classroom, the teacher retains all power and makes all decisions about learning. Learning is teacher-generated, with step-by-step instructions on what to do and how to do it, which was aptly labeled by Kittle and Gallagher (2020) as "helicopter teaching." In short, learning is often overdirected and overprescribed.

That lack of control is stressful for all students, but it leaves secondary students in particular woefully unprepared for college, where they are expected to be more independent learners, to generate and organize their own thinking, and to make decisions about their learning. To promote student wellness, the fundamental shift should be to a

more student-directed classroom where "student voice and agency are not so much 'permitted,' but are deliberately activated as a natural byproduct of the culture built in the school and the system as a whole" (Fullan, 2021, p. 8).

Our overprescribing of learning tasks comes from the best intentions—after all, we know the learning goal that we want students to reach and we are confident we know which task will get them there. What we often fail to realize is that our tasks are not infallible—they may not work for all students. It's better to show students the learning goal, help them understand how they learn best, and give them some freedom to use teacher-designed tasks or structure their own learning tasks (Vatterott, 2015).

When we allow students choices in how they learn and how to demonstrate that learning, we give them opportunities to think about their learning and create strategies that work for them. Students feel more in control of their learning when *they* determine what they need to do to master the goals or demonstrate their learning on assessments. They are also more engaged and less stressed.

As students gain control, they learn how to self-assess. Then they can cite evidence that they have either met a learning goal or not yet mastered it. They can chart their own progress, conduct student-led conferences to demonstrate their learning, or set their own goals for improvement (Vatterott, 2018).

2 Give students more control over their grades.

When high school students were asked to rate their top sources of stress, grades, tests, and other assessments topped the list, with overall workload and homework a close second. These results were relatively consistent before and during the pandemic (Challenge Success & NBC News, 2021). Whoever controls the grades has a powerful impact on student stress, and traditional grading practices often leave students with little control. Many factors can impact how stressful grades are—if the marks are permanent; if they are averaged; or how much tests, quizzes, projects, homework, etc., are weighted. Particularly stressful are moment-in-time paper-and-pencil tests that require students to perform on cue. When teachers add or subtract points for behaviors such as meeting deadlines, getting to class on time, and bringing materials, the grade becomes more muddled, more uncertain, and more stressful.

The easiest way to give students more control over their grades is to adopt some standards-based grading practices such as:

- Giving students choices in methods of assessment in addition to traditional paper-and-pencil tests. Consider alternatives such as performance tasks, papers, projects, or presentations.
- Allowing multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning—whether through formative assessments, retakes, or revisions. What's

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important is that students reach the learning goal and can continue to improve their grade.

■ Grading in pencil. *Replace* (don't average) old information with the newest evidence of learning. Consider the most recent evidence to be the most accurate.

■ Using non-punitive formative feedback. Feedback should be free help—no grade or mark need be associated with it.

■ Using homework as ungraded formative feedback. Not grading homework further empowers students to self-assess and to complete only those tasks (or design their own tasks) that will help them reach the learning goals.

Teachers often voice the concern that some students need points for homework as a way to "save" them from poor test scores. But the save is unnecessary if teachers are allowing multiple opportunities to show mastery, if they are grading in pencil, and if they are replacing old information with new information. When these practices are implemented as a package, it takes the heat off stressed students (Vatterott, 2015; 2018; 2019).

For more on this topic, check out Cathy Vatterott's blog post "What the Pandemic Taught Us About Education (That We Already Knew)."

3 Give students more control over their time.

Just like employees, students are less stressed when they have more flexibility in their schedules. One way to give students flexibility is to give them more blocks of autonomous time during the school day. Elementary students generally have some time for recess and free play, and students new to middle school often ask, "Why don't we still have recess?" Middle and secondary students can benefit from similar breaks where they can hang out with friends, take a walk, or just enjoy some quite time alone. While some may argue the lunch period fulfills this need, lunch is often too short to offer students much choice in downtime.

There are numerous ways to address this problem. James E. Dottke High School in West Allis, Wisconsin, for example, has implemented a "Flex 40" lunch. A typical 25-minute lunch period often confines students to a noisy cafeteria without access to solitude or other spaces. During "Flex 40," a 40-minute lunch period, students can pick almost any space in the school to relax and recharge. They might play music, shoot baskets on the basketball court, or just sit in a classroom.

Other schools use advisory or academic lab periods to give students a break from instruction and allow them the freedom to work on homework or other projects, meet with teachers for consultation or feedback, or visit with school counselors. Some schools extend the passing time between classes from the typical three minutes to seven minutes to help students feel less rushed and give them time to say hello to friends or use the restroom.

Teachers can also give students more control over time in the classroom by allowing short breaks from learning so students can stand, walk, get a drink, or just daydream for a bit. They can provide more in-class time to work on assignments and be flexible about the timing of in-class assessments. If many students indicate they need more time to prepare, teachers could consider delaying assessments.

4 Provide more support for student mental health.

In addition to practices that allow students more autonomy and flexibility, a well-rounded approach to student well-being includes explicit mental health support for students. Ideally, a shift in school culture would normalize mental health support, so it is as accessible as tutoring

and other academic interventions. In the Tulsa Public Schools, Care and Connect Centers provide in-person spaces for students to work with adults for technology support, tutoring, or counseling services. Here are some other practices that are becoming more common as schools prioritize student well-being:

- Granting students excused absences for mental health days.
- Establishing a "Choose a Trusted Adult" program to assure each student has at least one adult they can go to for support.
- Developing a peer counseling program. The Hope Squad at Hilliard Davidson High School in Ohio partners student volunteers with adults to serve as a mental health resource for other students. Students are elected to the Hope Squad by their peers—not as formal counselors, but to act as watchdogs and compassionate listeners. Hope Squad students are trained to spot peers with mental health struggles, persuade them to get help from a trusted adult, or in some cases, refer them to adult support (Gewertz, 2022).
- Partnering with local care providers to provide free mental health support for students.
- Educating students and parents about wellness issues like sleep, nutrition, or restorative practices.

Reflect & Discuss

In what ways could you and your school give students more flexibility, autonomy, and control?

Is student mental health a priority at your school? Are you doing a good job communicating that it's a priority?

How else might we rethink student well-being in light of what we've learned from the pandemic?

Resetting Priorities

The pandemic reshaped our thinking about so many aspects of our lives, resulting for many of us in a reordering of our priorities. Just as the pandemic precipitated a dramatic shift in the job market, it is fitting that it should trigger an equally dramatic shift in education. The "great resignation" should be our cue to initiate a "great reset" in our school practices with a renewed commitment to student well-being. That commitment can begin by empowering students with the autonomy, flexibility, control, and support that they need to thrive and be well.

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Cathy Vatterott is professor emeritus of education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She is the author of two ASCD books, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, 2nd edition (2018), and *Rethinking Grading: Meaningful Assessment for Standards-Based Learning* (2015).

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Fixing Your School's **Well-Being Ecosystem**

For teachers to have the bandwidth to thrive, schools need to revamp policies that chip away at energy and efficacy.

Jane Kise and Ann C. Holm

I keep telling myself, 'Assume positive intent.' But the number of mental health days teachers are taking is straining our resources to the breaking point."

As consultants who help school leaders improve their effectiveness, we've heard this sentiment from school leaders all across the country this year. These leaders are concerned that their own capacity for compassion is running dangerously low. They're hoping that the long summer break will recharge everyone, resulting in a "new normal" in the fall.

However, the high levels of teacher stress and mental health days are only symptoms of a bigger problem. Further, relying on self-care as the solution is like bandaging up an injured goalie and putting her back in the nets without treating the actual injury. As members of a profession that was highly stressful even before the pandemic, teachers can

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only improve their mental health so much via self-care.

Why? Because self-care is only part of the long-term answer. Another huge factor is the environment in which teachers work and that influences their sense of efficacy—their learning community and, of course, the outside pressures placed on that community. We know that collective teacher efficacy—a focus on common goals to improve student achievement, with confidence in reaching those goals by working together—ranks second out of more than 200 influences on student learning, according to John Hattie's research (Visible Learning Meta, 2022). If teachers are working within a system that doesn't foster energy, engagement, and other sources of efficacy, they'll continue to exhibit the symptoms and consequences of stress. The result? Less learning for students.

It's All About the Bandwidth

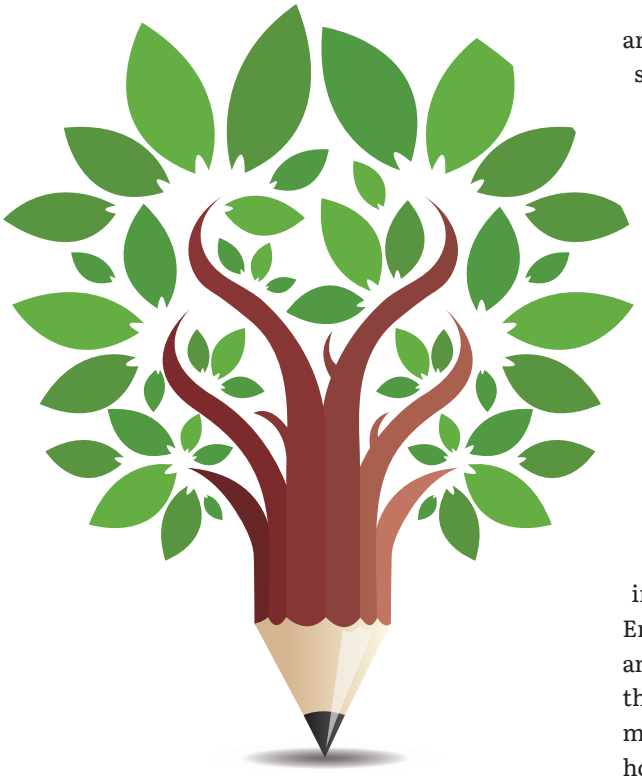
Our research on brain energy and *bandwidth*—one's capacity for staying energized, effective, engaged, and confident in their self-efficacy—began in 2015. Long before the pandemic, we found that educators' bandwidth was on the decline. Several trends in society and schools have led to norms, practices, and policies that don't sync with how our brains work. We created and validated a survey to help individuals and organizations pinpoint the factors driving low bandwidth.

Think of your school as an ecosystem where a very specific combination of nutrients, biodiversity, and other factors is necessary for its specific organisms to thrive. Each individual is responsible for behaviors that lead to health, but if the ecosystem is stressed by failing to incorporate key elements essential to its survival, the individuals are doomed.

How might your teachers respond to the following question: "My learning community allows me to be effective and efficient." Our research has shown that this measure of organizational support is the biggest predictor of individual bandwidth scores. This is why teachers are lashing out at the self-care movement in education. They know it won't be enough to fuel the ongoing struggle to stay energized and passionate for the task of educating each and every child, accepting each learner as they are, where they are. If the vision teachers are given doesn't match the reality of time, resources, energy, student mental health capacity, and so on, collective efficacy is doomed.

How might your teachers respond to the following statement: "My learning community allows me to be effective and efficient."

Whatever level of leadership you may be at, consider what you can do to improve the ecosystem of your learning community. Here are six steps you might take to restore your learning community ecosystem to a place where everyone can thrive.



~ 1 ~

Limit Your Priorities

Until 150 years ago, the word "priority" had no plural (McKeown, 2014). You could only have one. Initiative fatigue is no joke; having more to do than a human being *can* do drains our sense of efficacy and meaning.

Be brave. Have your staff, working in teams, list all the responsibilities they have, in order of the importance they see each one having. Then have them indicate which responsibilities they believe they're realistically able to accomplish. Use this data to eliminate responsibilities that aren't important—or that simply cannot be accomplished with current resources. A leader with an unrealistic vision is just as irresponsible as a leader with no vision at all; either way, your learning community can't reach that vision. If you do this well, you'll have the data to "influence upward" to get some responsibilities off teachers' plates. Use phrases such as, "We are focusing on the most important factors for student achievement, eliminating *for now* time-intensive efforts that take resources away from these high-impact priorities."

~ 2 ~

Set Guardrails

Not even Steve Jobs understood the societal implications of the iPhone when he introduced it in 2007. Expectations of instant access and instant response—and the ability to instantly complain—are incompatible with what humans need to do good work.

You as a leader can set—and model—guardrail policies to help teachers work in ways that match how their brains work. Encourage turning off all notifications and only answering emails and texts at set times during the day. Standardize a schoolwide "Away" message so parents hear a consistent policy about how quickly teachers will respond to them and have realistic expectations. This can be kept simple, such as, "Please know that I answer emails only at set times during the teaching day and aim to respond to emails within 24 hours." Don't send or answer emails after school hours (and schedule any you *do* write to arrive the next day). Talk about the benefits and dangers of allowing parents to text staff members. Insist on putting phones away during meetings, since multitasking is a myth; your brain is actually *task-switching*, resulting in misunderstandings and time-wasting inefficiency (Medina, 2014).

In other words, reexamine energy-sapping policies and practices that may have become building norms. Be clear about the new policies, so teachers can comfortably reset their practices to stay within the guardrails.

~ 3 ~

Dust Off Do Not Disturb Signs

Did you know that if you are concentrating on a demanding task like delivering a lesson, providing student feedback, planning lessons,

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Initiative fatigue is no joke; having more to do than a human being *can* do drains our sense of efficacy and meaning.

or reviewing student data, interruptions waste far more time than the few minute it takes to answer a call from the office or respond to a knock on the door? It takes about 23 minutes to get back to the same level of concentration you had before the interruption (Mark, Wang, & Niiya, 2014). In our workshops, we hand out "Do not disturb—brain at work" doorknob hangers to remind people of how time-wasting even a one-minute interruption is when the task is complex.

Once, "Do Not Disturb" signs had real power. Everyone understood the value of concentration. Now we take for granted our loss of focus, caused by everything from announcements over the PA during class time to mandatory meetings that eat into teachers prep time—or lunch. We even interrupt ourselves and each other, giving and receiving texts, checking whether there's anything new on that breaking headline, etc.

Broadcast the fact that, as humans, we're wired to concentrate on complex tasks for about 52 minutes at a time, then rest for about 17 minutes (Bailey, 2018). Then actively work to decrease interruptions by minimizing loudspeaker announcements, ensuring teachers are only required to attend meetings essential to their own work, and so on.

Have your staff experiment with putting their phones in a drawer across their classroom from their desk to experience deeper concentration. If teachers share offices or have only their classrooms as workspace, consider where in your building you might create "Do Not Disturb" carrels. Talk with everyone about how finding times for deep concentration increases how much they can accomplish.

~ 4 ~

Cultivate Community

The pressures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic led to many teachers saying, "I don't have time for community building. Just let me work in my classroom." A better normal needs to include the understanding that humans evolved as social creatures. Stress is inevitable for human beings who have goals and relationships. But one major characteristic of those who exhibit hardiness, defined as the capacity to grow from stress, is that they do not isolate themselves. Instead, they seek out those who care about them and about whom they care. They know that talking or simply being with those experiencing similar circumstances is actually an antidote to the potentially harmful effects of stress.

Why? You've heard of oxytocin, the "cuddle" hormone that's released when we're with those we love. What's less known about oxytocin is that it's also released, in smaller amounts, when we experience stress; it actually protects our cardiovascular system, expanding arteries and veins in ways that decrease blood pressure and the harmful effects of chronic tenseness (McGonigal, 2013). However, people produce more oxytocin when they're around others they have caring relationships with, providing more of a buffer against stress's damage.

This doesn't mean learning community time needs to evolve into support group meetings. Short well-being check-ins, followed by solution-oriented discussions of formative assessments, classroom practices that are working, and the other ongoing tasks of your professional learning teams, can also let the oxytocin flow. In other words, cultivate purposeful teaming to build collective efficacy and mental health.

In our workshops, we hand out "Do Not Disturb—Brain at Work" doorknob hangers to remind educators of the importance of protecting their time.

~ 5 ~

Model Smart Practices

Making the most of the practices that lead to brain energy and bandwidth starts at the top. Personally, we won't work with a school unless the leaders commit to certain practices first, because teachers don't feel empowered to engage in self-care or other crucial practices unless these are modeled from the top (Skakon et al., 2010).

Whether you are a teacher leader, building administrator, district leader, or external provider, what you do and say counts. For example, it's true that some interruptions are inevitable. But when you know you need to concentrate to finish writing a grant, can people see a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door? Have you created a norm that a seldom-used conference room can be scheduled by anyone needing space to concentrate? Does your team know that you sometimes nap to regain focus after a long, stressful day before hopping in your car for the drive home?

~ 6 ~

Spread Blameless Discernment

Acknowledge openly that we all play the blame game. When things go wrong, we blame ourselves, others, circumstances, or some combination of the three. But getting to a "better normal" will require what's often referred to as blameless discernment. Muster as much objectivity as you can to ascertain what is really happening rather than simplistically attributing the problems to one person, group, or circumstance. And even if practices a particular group tends to follow *do* seem to be part of where things have gone off-track, frame this discovery in terms of where to start solutions rather than pointing fingers.

Is your default, "If I were a better leader, my teachers would be OK" or "If the teachers would just act like adults . . ." or "Once the pandemic is over, ___ won't be an issue"? These are examples of blaming oneself, others, or circumstances. Each may hold part of the truth, but the root problem—and solutions—are likely more nuanced, and you can't solve the root problem unless it's correctly identified.

As you shift organizational norms and practices to help everyone reclaim their energy, collaborate with key colleagues to use blameless discernment to understand how you got to where you are, what needs to change, and how to best lead that change. Questions that can help you adopt this mindset include, "What might an observer new to our situation point out about how we got to where we are?" "What data might

Reflect & Discuss

Consider the aspects of your work as an educator that most sap your energy and "bandwidth". Which ones result from policies in your school that could realistically change?

Leaders: The suggestions for "setting guardrails" and "do not disturb" signals all relate to protecting time for concentrated work. Which of these suggestions—that you could actually try—would most protect your teachers?

Why do so many schools suffer from initiative fatigue? How could you address the root causes of this in your school?

One major characteristic of those who exhibit hardiness, defined as the capacity to grow from stress, is that they do not isolate themselves.

we examine to confirm or dismiss our assumptions?" and "Are we failing to see our own blind spots or failing to step into the shoes of others to better understand their needs or actions?"

Revitalizing Your Ecosystem

As you discern and prepare to shift systems and your own day-to-day practices in the community-reviving ways described, be sure to take steps to decrease *your* stress. Enlist a few colleagues to, say, frequently remind you to observe guardrails or limit the initiatives you embrace. As you ponder ways to improve your school's ecosystem, model healthy practices by protecting from interruptions the time you spend reflecting on how to bring change. Ignore less important demands for action until you've identified how to revitalize the ecosystem of your learning community so that everyone can thrive.

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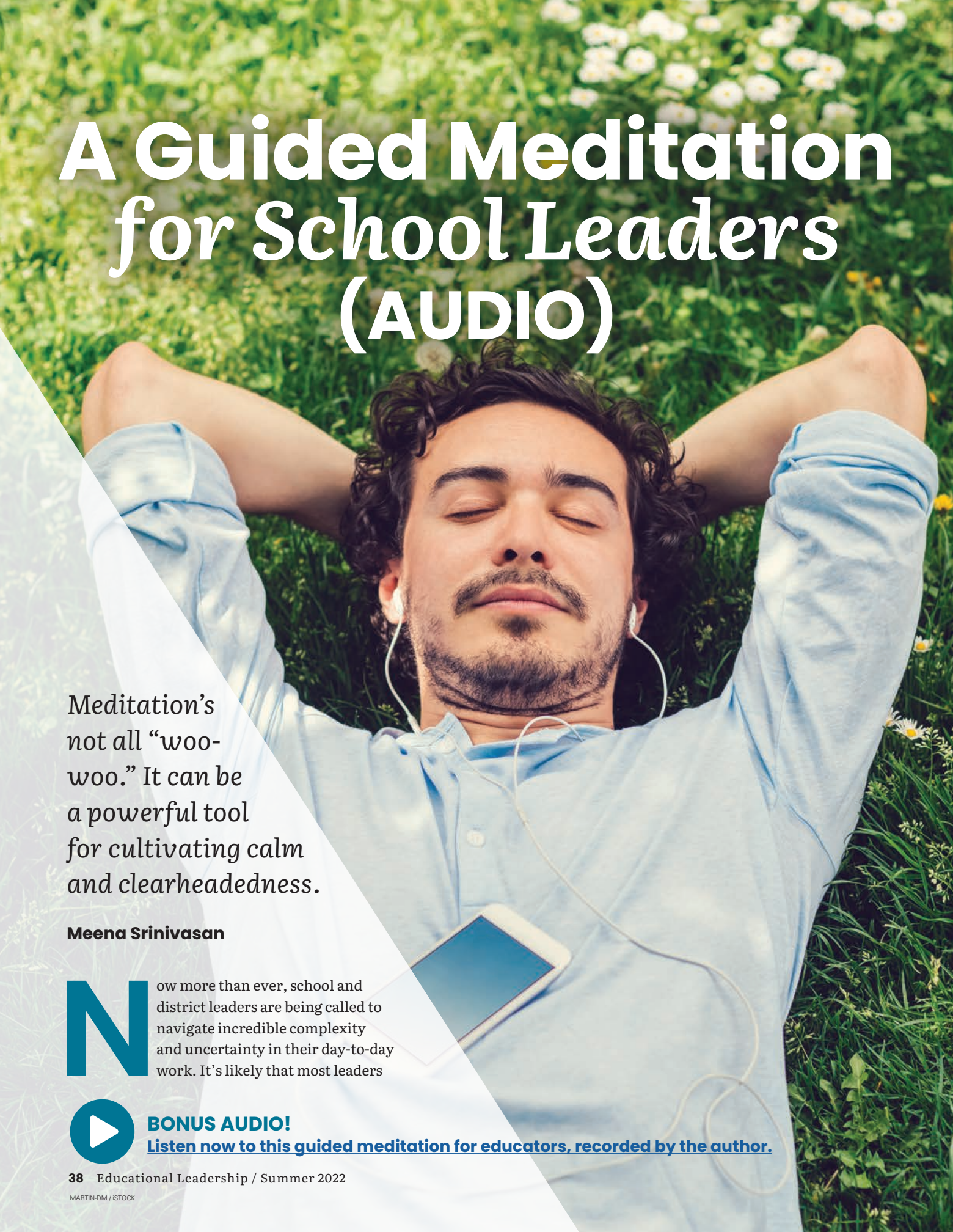
Take Jane Kise and Ann Holm's self-assessment survey to gauge your own educator bandwidth—and learn how to reclaim it.

A Guided Meditation *for School Leaders* (AUDIO)



Meditation's not all "woo-woo." It can be a powerful tool for cultivating calm and clearheadedness.

Meena Srinivasan

Now more than ever, school and district leaders are being called to navigate incredible complexity and uncertainty in their day-to-day work. It's likely that most leaders

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Listen now to this guided meditation for educators, recorded by the author.

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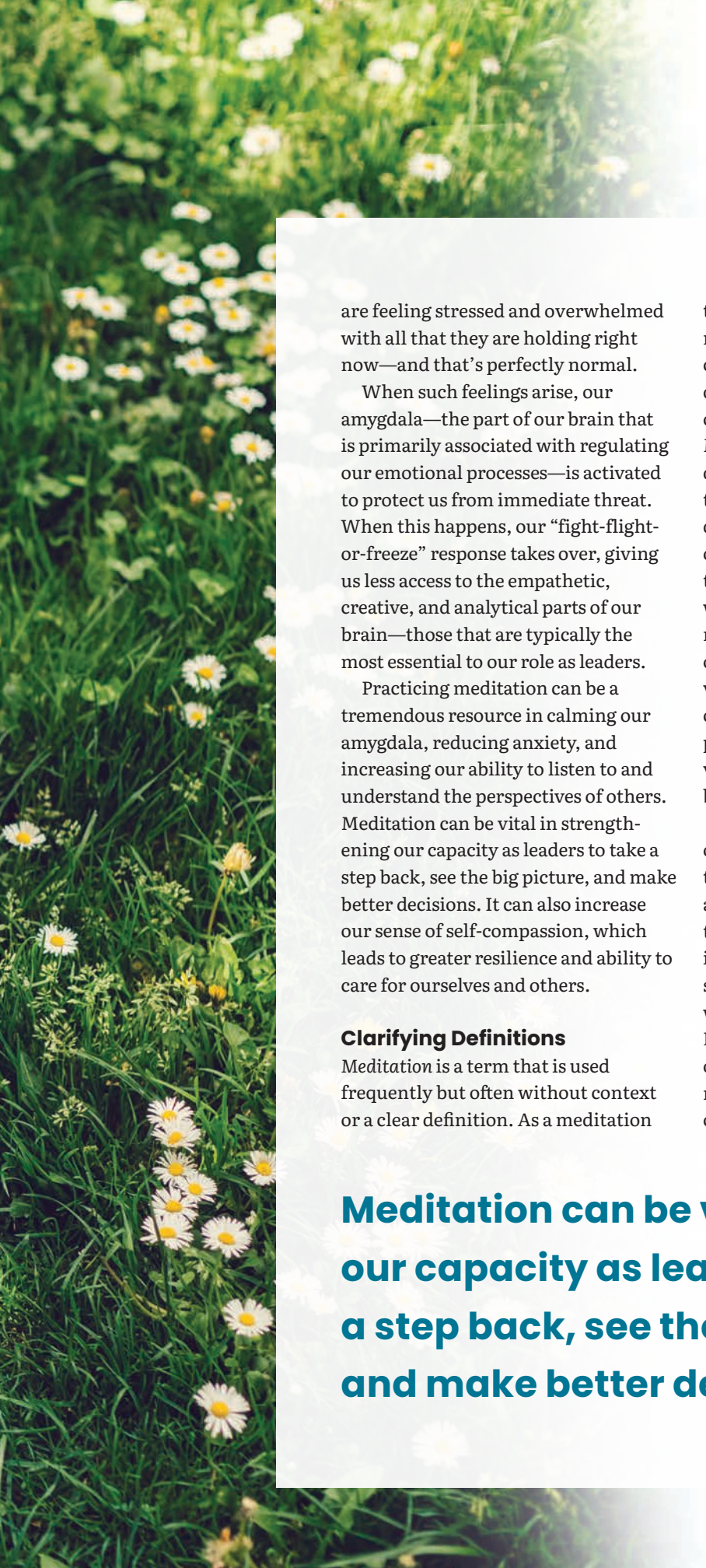

are feeling stressed and overwhelmed with all that they are holding right now—and that's perfectly normal.

When such feelings arise, our amygdala—the part of our brain that is primarily associated with regulating our emotional processes—is activated to protect us from immediate threat. When this happens, our "fight-flight-or-freeze" response takes over, giving us less access to the empathetic, creative, and analytical parts of our brain—those that are typically the most essential to our role as leaders.

Practicing meditation can be a tremendous resource in calming our amygdala, reducing anxiety, and increasing our ability to listen to and understand the perspectives of others. Meditation can be vital in strengthening our capacity as leaders to take a step back, see the big picture, and make better decisions. It can also increase our sense of self-compassion, which leads to greater resilience and ability to care for ourselves and others.

Clarifying Definitions

Meditation is a term that is used frequently but often without context or a clear definition. As a meditation teacher, I define meditation as "any mind-body practice that intentionally cultivates awareness and positive qualities of being, including openness, curiosity, empathy, and kindness." Meditation is simply a means to develop these capacities. When practiced in secular settings, meditation does not seek to promote or impede one's religious beliefs but rather cultivate our individual and collective well-being. There are many types of meditation—including those that focus on expanding your awareness, cultivating peace, opening your heart, and calming your mind. Some of the most popular types of meditation include visualization, loving-kindness, and breath awareness.

Mindfulness is a popular term that is often used interchangeably with meditation. But while their applications are intertwined, there is a clear distinction between the two. Meditation is a formal practice, something you schedule and engage in exclusively—without (the illusion of) multitasking. By contrast, mindfulness is the quality of awareness that we can bring to each moment by being fully present. We can exercise mindfulness *anytime*,

Meditation can be vital in strengthening our capacity as leaders to take a step back, see the big picture, and make better decisions.

Just 12 minutes of meditation five or more days a week can result in measurable improvements in our attention and working memory.

anywhere, and with *anyone*. I define mindfulness as "paying attention to our inner and outer life as it unfolds while being grounded in our body so that our mind can settle, and we can cultivate a curious, open-hearted presence and awareness of our interconnection with all life." Our meditation practice can help us strengthen our mindfulness muscle, so we have greater capacity to be mindful throughout the day.

At the organization I lead, Transformative Educational Leadership, school and district leaders engage in meditation and other embodiment practices to cultivate the inner change needed to lead outer change in their communities. For example, school leaders have described how meditation practices helped them become aware of their own habits and attitudes, especially around race, and bring empathy and a clear focus on equity into their decision-making.

Every day, education leaders face a myriad of systemic challenges that cannot be solved by applying the same ways of thinking and reacting. Meditation practices can help leaders to not only find more calm but also develop *new* ways of seeing and responding to these challenges.

Starting a Meditation Practice

While meditation has the potential to promote well-being and strengthen your leadership, starting anything new can feel daunting. Here are three tips to help ease you in.

1

Meditate first thing in the morning! Instead of starting your day checking email or reading the news, which can immediately activate your stress, start your day with meditation to cultivate centeredness and calm. Find a meditation practice that works for you: If you need a place to begin, listen to the eight-minute guided breath-awareness meditation that accompanies this article. I recorded it specifically for educators to take the time to release stress and nourish their own well-being before they attend to others (as they are wired to do). *An important note:* Breath isn't always a neutral anchor for meditation. If focusing on your breathing agitates you in any way, try other anchors like listening to sounds or focusing on a part of your body that feels neutral or pleasant.

2

Begin your meetings with a few moments (or minutes) of meditation. Since Transformative Educational Leadership's inception, every time we gather as a staff or community we begin with an "arriving and centering" practice. This acknowledges that we are all coming from different places and may need a transition from the thoughts and energies we carried in. An arriving and centering practice may simply be one person guiding a few minutes of silent reflection where all are invited to find a comfortable position and notice the sensations in their body or thoughts that are arising as they breathe. Taking this short time-out helps connect our mind and bodies so we can be present and engaged with each other for the work ahead.

3

Start small and be consistent. Don't set out to meditate for 30 minutes on your first attempt at practicing. The key isn't length but consistency. Neuroscientist and *Peak Mind* author Amishi Jha and her research team have demonstrated that just 12 minutes of meditation five or more days a

week can result in measurable improvements in our attention and working memory.

Need motivation? Practicing meditation in community with colleagues can support a routine. At one school where I worked, several educators gathered weekly to meditate together; a similar opportunity was offered to staff during my time as a central office administrator.

Finally, while meditation has countless benefits in and of itself, practicing it as an education leader is ultimately in service of K–12 systems. Calm and clearheaded leaders are better equipped to support truly equitable, just, healthy, connected, and thriving learning communities.

Meena Srinivasan is one of *Mindful Magazine's* 2022 Ten Powerful Women of the Mindfulness Movement. She is also the founding executive director of Transformative Educational Leadership. Prior to this role, she spent five years working in partnership with CASEL to implement SEL systemwide in the Oakland Unified School District. Srinivasan is the author of several books, including *Integrating SEL Into Every Classroom* (Norton Professional Books, 2021). Follow her on Twitter.

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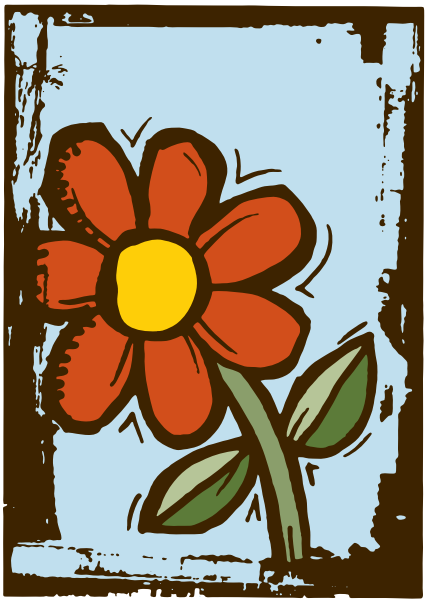
How to Make Your School Psychologically SAFE



Four critical steps for nurturing the seeds of inclusivity in school communities.

Nita Creekmore and Michael Creekmore

This past year has been hard for many educators—some say as hard as the first year of the pandemic. There have been staff shortages due to teachers being sick or dealing with well-being and emotional struggles. This, in turn, has required other teachers to cover classes, lunch duties, and other needs, adding to already heavy caseloads. There has also been the high-stress job of combating the instructional gaps and social-emotional issues that many students experienced during remote learning.

But while this past year—and teaching in the midst of a pandemic in general—has been challenging for everyone, educators in communities that are *inclusive* and *psychologically safe* have been able to weather the storm a bit easier. These educators have been able to not just survive but thrive. Why is that? Because being in an inclusive school community—one in which members feel accepted, safe, respected, and celebrated, and know that their voice matters—increases the overall well-being of all members of that community and makes facing challenges easier.

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What exactly do we mean by an "inclusive community"? According to the Community Toolbox created by The Center for Community Health and Development:[1]

> An inclusive community does everything it can to respect all its citizens, gives them full access to resources, and promotes equal treatment and opportunity. It works to eliminate all forms of discrimination. It engages all its citizens in decision-making processes that affect their lives. It values diversity and responds quickly to racist and other discriminating incidents.

In an inclusive community, psychological safety is first priority. This means acts of exclusion and injustice based on identity or other factors are not tolerated. As educators of color, we have both been in spaces where our voices have been muffled, not heard, or devalued in conversations around transformation of the schools in which we worked. Not feeling like you are "held" and valued at the tables at which you sit can prompt a person rethinking whether the space in which they work is where they want to be—especially for educators from marginalized communities.

Inclusion Takes Work—From Everyone

Creating a culture of inclusivity takes ongoing, intentional work from every community member. A recent report on creating inclusive school cultures, from the Community Inclusion Project in Ontario, notes that efforts to that end must be based on the philosophy that the *whole school* shares in the responsibility for inclusion. A real culture of inclusion cannot come about unless everyone embraces it.[2] This philosophy and commitment begins at the top—with the school leaders—and permeates throughout the entire community. Leaders in the building must set the overall tone of honoring and including everyone, and from that soil, seeds of acceptance and belonging, trust, communication, and learning can grow. Here are some places to start.

Planting Seeds of Acceptance and Belonging

First and foremost, acceptance and belonging must be a core element of your school community. Establishing this begins with creating a vision, mission, and goals that include *all* the members within the community. Whatever process you use for this, your vision, mission, and goals should be shaped by all stakeholders, not just the most vocal or privileged. At the start of this process, it's important to create ways for people to talk openly about whether they feel accepted and that they "belong" in the school—and if not, what might help. Invite people, in safe spaces, to share answers to questions like:

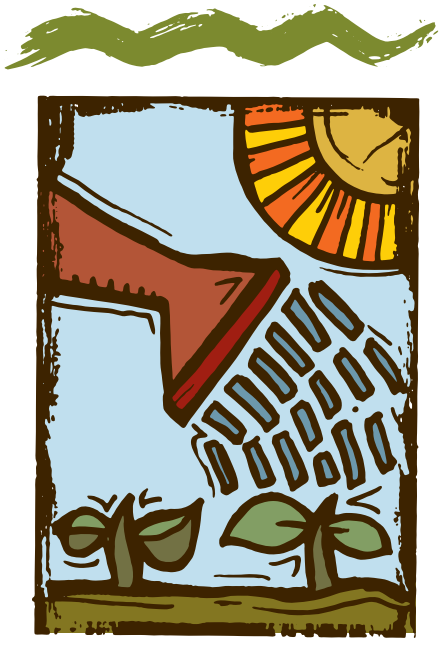
- Do you feel accepted in this space?
- If you do, what makes you feel accepted?
- If not, what makes you not feel accepted in this space?
- Do you feel like you belong in the community? Why or why not?
- How can we create a school culture of greater acceptance and belonging?

These questions seem simple, but the conversations and information gathered through them can be transformational. Beginning each school year with this kind of discussion, facilitated by leadership team members, teachers or department heads, and even students, can provide a model that enables these discussions to happen throughout the school in ongoing ways. This can allow a ripple effect of acceptance and belonging to spread through your school.

Having such conversations often releases a heavy weight from some members of your community. It helps people feel valued and

Educators in communities that are inclusive and psychologically safe weathered the storm of the pandemic a bit easier.

validated. Taking the time to have these conversations allows people in your school community to be their authentic selves—which is liberating and feeds into everyone's overall sense of well-being. The foundational thing is to center educators whose voices are lacking or not being heard. Uncomfortableness in these conversations is bound to happen—but only through feeling some discomfort, through open and honest communication with respect and trust, will true transformation occur. Leaders should be open and transparent about the why behind the discussions.



A school's vision, mission, and goals are living documents. Revisit them often and discuss them in ways that bring in everyone's perspectives. Leaders might also create a way to check in individually with teachers and staff members to see how they're feeling about the mission and goals. School leaders should build an inclusive team that, throughout the school year, thinks about and takes action on ways to create a more accepting culture and increase everyone's sense of belonging.

Planting Seeds of Trust

Trust takes intentionality to build—and can be so easily broken. But trust is essential to an inclusive school community. Trust helps to create that psychologically safe environment where members feel "held." When people in the school community trust one another, they know that people in their community are going to do what they say they will do and that they mean what they say. They know everyone will do their job the best they can and make the best interests of the school their priority.

Without this sense of trust, members of the school community will have higher stress levels. Their overall desire to come to work will lessen. When some educators or staff don't want to come to work, when they do not feel comfortable or safe there, colleagues pick up on it. This affects the well-being of the whole community. Planting and cultivating seeds of trust—so that members of the community trust others will do their part and "have their back" if necessary—is essential.

A key way for leaders to plant seeds of trust is to collectively identify and communicate clear roles and expectations for all the members of the community, so everyone knows what they're expected to do in their role and what's expected of others. This helps people feel they can count on one another and decreases confusion and conflict. Creating realistic expectations of all community members involves identifying people's strengths and interests or passions. Teams and departments might hold meetings (along with school leaders) early in the year to discuss team members' strengths and areas of growth, and agree on roles and responsibilities.

Other ways a leader can strengthen trust include:

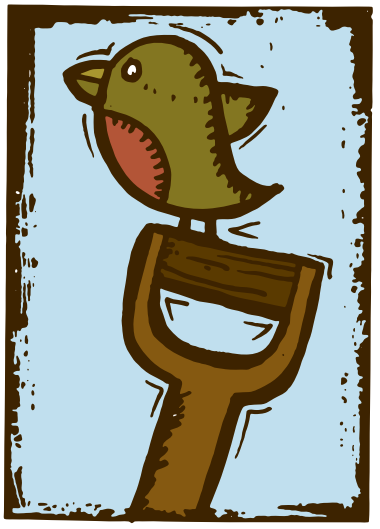
- Always doing what *you* say you're going to do,

to model accountability.

■ Creating time and space for team building, including activities that help members of the team get to know each other better.

■ Making space for self-care in the school community and modeling taking care of yourself.

Building trust is not a "check-the-box," activity only done at the beginning of the year. It must be ongoing work that sets the stage for strong relationship building and maintenance.



Planting Seeds of Compassionate Communication

Most educators know the value of communication among members of the school community—especially when the communication is open and clear and allows all voices to be heard. The keys to communication that helps build an inclusive school community are *transparency* and *compassion*. And the times when it is not so easy to communicate something within the community (like when a leader is communicating about something the staff may not take well, even though it seems "not a big deal" to the leader) are usually when clear, compassionate communication is most crucial. It could be as simple as announcing a change in schedule for the day. The transparency and compassion piece is crucial because change of routine can alter a person's entire frame of mind—we are human first, right?

Compassionate communication means giving and receiving messages in a way that's empathetic and thoughtful. It allows for honest communication even of hard messages because it grounds that communication in a context of care. For instance, in the example just mentioned, the principal can be transparent by communicating the big idea behind the schedule-changing decisions being made that are beyond teachers' control.

There are many ways leaders, teachers, and staff can encourage compassionate communication:

■ Bring people together frequently in different configurations to check in on how things are going, making sure the space feels safe and encourages honesty.

■ Create an "open door" policy—and be *truly* open when someone in the school comes to you to talk about their needs, problems, or successes.

■ Find ways for everyone involved to collaborate on big topics or changes that affect the community, using a process that ensures all voices will be heard.

■ Be transparent about districtwide mandates and what is expected.

■ Teachers can use compassionate communication with students and parents, such as during parent/teacher conferences.

Planting Seeds of Learning—About Diversity and Equity

In a space that's *defined* by learning, it may seem odd to emphasize learning as one of the seeds we need to grow to build an inclusive

The keys to communication that helps build an inclusive school community are *transparency* and *compassion*.

community. But to create an inclusive community, everyone within that community needs to learn ways to be a better human, often by developing a more open mind and heart toward diversity and being more attentive to issues of equity, inclusion, and acceptance. A key element of an inclusive school community is knowing how to identify and respond quickly to racism and other forms of discrimination that may take place within the school. Getting there often takes learning—and unlearning—on the part of all members.

Ways to plant seeds of such learning include:

- To help community members become more aware of issues of equity and racism, and equity-related problems in the school, bring in trainers who've done extensive work in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools.
- Continue to do the work of learning through frequent schoolwide book studies and discussions. Help community members dig into structural and personal biases through structured reflection and self-exploration.
- Incorporate non-mainstream perspectives into professional development, meetings, and collaborative work teachers participate in. Consider whose voices *aren't* being heard.
- Help teachers ensure their classroom lessons are culturally responsive, inclusive, and relevant to their students. The seed of learning should thread into classroom spaces.

This kind of learning should be embedded throughout the school year. It's important to remember that since we are all human, mistakes will happen, and we won't always get it right.

Trust helps create a safe environment where members feel "held."

But we can always learn and grow.

Repairing Frayed Relationships

One result of the many shifts made in K–12 education over the past two-and-a half years has been that relationships in schools have frayed and differences in viewpoints and values have grown, at times pitting members of the school community against each other—parents against teachers, teachers against administrators, and so on. This has likely contributed to many educators leaving their school or the profession. However, by ensuring that all members of the community feel included, accepted, and heard, we can make each school a place where differences are worked out respectfully—and a place where we all feel welcomed and celebrated.

[1]The Community Toolbox: Cultural Competence and Spirituality in Community Building. (2022). "Building Inclusive Communities."

[2]Ontario Community Inclusion Project of Community Living Ontario. "An Inclusive School Culture."

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Letting STUDENT VOICE Lead the Way

To increase healing and well-being in school, make sure your students are part of the process.

Catharine Biddle, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Mark Tappan

Good morning, Kindergarten!" Mrs. Kelly says to her arriving students. "Today is Elliot's Someday, and he wants more than anything to go outside and look at the sky. What do you think we will see?"

The children gather around Elliot, offering high fives and hugs. The fleece blankets they'll take with them to lie on as they gaze at the sky are stacked neatly on the teacher's desk, along with a canvas bag filled with

Above: 3rd graders head into the woods behind the school for an outdoor microadventure.

PHOTO BY LAURA THOMAS

water and snacks. "So," Mrs. Kelly explains, "we have a whole morning planned in honor of Elliot's Someday wish. We'll read *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* and talk about clouds. We'll even draw our own clouds with white crayons on blue construction paper."

When it is time to go outside, Elliot—a small boy with a crooked, mischievous smile whose mother has struggled to find secure housing in an unstable rural rental market—can hardly contain himself. This practice of "Somedays" in his school invites all students and teachers to share their wish for a special activity. It is one of several strategies at the core of the all-school approach that we as educational researchers designed and piloted in partnership with several rural elementary schools. Working closely with three Maine schools between 2017 and 2021, and replicating successful practices with other schools in Maine and California, we brought together the best of what we know about creating and sustaining healthy developmental ecologies for children and youth in socio-economically and racially diverse rural elementary schools.

Our experience suggests that students themselves have a key role to play in helping educators create school environments that nurture well-being. We scaffolded schoolwide shifts in how teachers understand and work with children, infused schools with student-initiated activities, and created the necessary conditions for young people to participate in their own healing.

Listening with Care

In *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy*, Elizabeth Dutro (2019) says that the word *trauma* is both ubiquitous in its use these days and highly ambiguous. Healing, she says, requires both a critical lens—the "necessary work of questioning what is meant by the term *trauma*"—and a kind of tenderness, openness, and flexibility that unsettles traditional schooling (p. 4). Becoming a trauma-responsive school, then, is not an easy or straightforward task. Developing genuine, trusting relationships and creating opportunities for voice and empowerment are often in contrast with teacher authority and school rules designed to maintain control and move things along in orderly fashion (Deci & Ryan, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). This is especially true when those teaching and learning are under the kind of stress we've seen during the pandemic.

PHOTO BY LAURA THOMAS

Two 4th graders write and draw about the natural world.

Over the past five years, our team of researchers and practitioners at the Rural Vitality Lab piloted and refined schoolwide strategies for fostering student voice and empowerment in schools to promote mental health, well-being, and emotional healing. Our approach is grounded on the assumption that trauma-responsive school culture is best achieved in genuine relationships with children. This requires that we listen to students and trust them as experts on their own experience and that we engage them as full and active partners in school and community transformation. If promoting

PHOTO BY ASHLEY CIRONE

Second graders fulfill one classmate's Someday wish of "I want to be a snake."

agency, control, and empowerment is critical to addressing and mitigating adversity, stress, and trauma, our job is to create opportunities for student voice, engagement, and meaningful participation (van der Kolk, 2014).

A focus on equity was foundational to our work—our goal was to ensure that all students in our three initial rural Maine partner schools had access to the same opportunities such as food, transportation, and mental health support. This included setting up food pantries, providing coat and boot closets, and expanding in-school mental health services. A school-based coach trained in our approach then worked in partnership with teachers and school staff to develop a shared understanding of the role that voice and empowerment play in trauma-responsive schooling. We initiated a set of whole-school practices designed to engage children around pressing and meaningful aspects of their lives, provide opportunities for students to express and access what they love and want from school, and allow them to speak about and explore what feels unfair or impedes their education and growth.

Starting with Somedays

We began with the low-effort, high-impact activity that we call Somedays, adapted from our partnership with the Center for School Climate and Learning (Preble & Gordon, 2011). Like Elliot, every student and teacher in our partner schools completed this sentence: "Someday in school, I would like to ___." And then, each day for the rest of the year, the coach and a team of educators in each school did their very best to make those wishes come true.

Everyone involved was surprised by how modest and achievable the changes students asked for could be. A 4th grader asked to have recess with her 2nd grade cousin, whose lunch schedule was different from hers. A 3rd grader wanted every student to start the new quarter with a 100 already in the grade book so they could each feel successful for one day. Another wanted to have his mother read a book in Spanish while he translated for the class. Teachers were able to join in, too: One asked for a compliment day where people left nice notes for one another. Another wished to leave school a bit early one day to meet her son at the bus stop.

When a student asked to bring in her pet

Each day for the rest of the year, the coach and a team of educators in each school did their very best to make those wishes come true.

(which wasn't possible), her Someday became an opportunity for everyone in the school to bring in a photo of a pet or an animal they loved. Pictures of dogs, cats, bunnies—even chickens—covered a huge bulletin board in the hallway that became a popular destination for students, parents, and teachers.

The response to Somedays had a surprisingly profound impact on the development and trajectory of our work. Teachers' perspectives of children changed, relationships deepened, and families reappraised the social boundaries between home and school. "What I like about Somedays is that you can trust that yours will come true," a 5th grade girl told us. "Let's say you don't really like a teacher and you don't really trust them, and then they make your Someday come true—and it's like, I can sort of trust these people." A mother of three children said, "Our school has always been a homey place. Now it feels more . . . it's more electrified."

Moving Toward Microadventures

In addition to Somedays, we piloted a related initiative called "Microadventures." When we asked students about the kind of changes to their schools they would like to make, we heard over and over again: More outdoor time, more recess, more movement. Together with students and teachers, we brainstormed ways to incorporate movement and outdoor time into the school day.

In outdoor education vernacular, microadventures are small, low-cost, easy-to-run expeditions. We joined with a local outdoor school to adapt this idea and build it into the curriculum through "Wilderness Wednesdays" or "Forest Fridays" (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019). Through these initiatives, students engaged in outdoor learning by designing and building shelters using mathematical concepts, identifying local flora and fauna found near the school, and writing creative responses to their experiences in the outdoors. Most important, students experienced multiple opportunities for cooperative, full-body learning that had them engaging in new ways with peers and their teachers.

Student-initiated Somedays increasingly became the impetus for microadventures that showcased children's interests, surprising skills, and underappreciated knowledge and capabilities. As a parent of a 3rd grade boy explained:

> He has trouble at school just staying focused on basic things, and he gets very frustrated. And like he just shuts down. . . . He liked the day that they built the shelters. He said that was awesome. The teachers are like, "We just can't get over how this kid can be such a leader outside of the classroom, where in the classroom he's quiet and reserved and not sure of himself." But he's an outdoor boy. Yeah . . . I feel like sometimes he's untapped on the potential that he has.

Microadventures ensure equitable access to opportunities and resources that meet basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Having autonomy, feeling competent, and being connected to others are keys to thriving and well-being, but these experiences are more accessible to some students than to others. As one principal explained, initiating and taking part in outdoor learning "makes students feel wanted and whole, involved in something bigger than themselves." She links happiness to the capacity for every student "to access their learning lives at school and be the kind of students or people they want to be. Kids are learning more about themselves. That's trust. They are learning to trust that they're going to be taken care of and that they can take care of themselves even better."

PHOTO BY LAURA THOMAS

Fifth graders learn about how animals adapt to winter in Maine.

When we asked students about the kind of changes to their schools they would like to make, we heard over and over again: More outdoor time, more recess, more movement.

Somedays and microadventures are both examples of what we call *student empowered social emotional learning* (SESEL). Traditional approaches to social-emotional learning (SEL) often use standardized curricular materials to promote the development of personal and relational competencies and skills that students are assumed to lack. Such SEL curricula tend to be teacher-centered and, in some cases, even used as behavioral management or disciplinary tools. SESEL, in contrast, encompasses practices that affirm what students bring to the classroom by encouraging students to identify and choose activities they love or value, to experience what it feels like to positively engage with and positively influence others, and in many cases, to share their expertise with classmates and teachers. These practices offer students a too-infrequent sense of control over their learning, connectedness to others, and a sense that they matter in their school environment (Brown, Biddle, & Tappan, 2022).

Empowering Students to Lead

Teachers cannot always know what challenges their students bring to school, but they can work to develop healthier school ecologies by creating opportunities for children to voice their needs and embrace their strengths. In one of our partner schools, the entire 6th grade—the oldest children in the school—took on a leadership role to improve the school's climate. With adult scaffolding, the student leadership team distributed climate surveys to other students and staff and helped younger children fill out their forms. Once the results were tabulated, the team set three schoolwide goals for the coming year: (1) make the school feel safer; (2) connect learning to student interests, talents, and strengths, and (3) include student voice in school decision making and offer more opportunities for students to work with, talk with, and learn from teachers and other students. As one of the teachers explained after seeing the survey results and hearing the students' presentation, "I didn't realize until the surveys came out—they think everything is done to them.

They don't have a say in things. What we're giving them for choices really aren't choices."

Throughout the school year, the 6th graders worked to put their plans in place. During Monday morning assemblies, they encouraged younger students to support one another, to stand up for each other, to treat one another with kindness. They acknowledged the stress of school, sharing relaxation tips that worked for them before and during tests and educating their fellow students about mindfulness practices. They created public art projects that made issues of difference and diversity a more visible and valued part of the school experience. They took on the role of supporting marginalized students, actively responding to experiences of unfairness and hurt. In the process, they made their own developmental gains. As an example of SESEL, students articulated what they cared about and valued, they engaged with issues and situations relevant to their lives, and they worked through differences and found commonalities.

The Link Between Voice and Well-Being

Listening to students' voices reminds us that children and youth are multifaceted, that developmental progress is multidimensional (Cantor et al., 2021). To understand children's needs, particularly children who because of systemic injustice and inequity experience school on the margins, we must create spaces and opportunities for them to speak about their experiences, to explain what isn't working, to ask for what they need, and to share what excites them and nurtures them. Doing so makes for good educational practice. Several important outcomes resulted from these and other opportunities for students to voice their interests, desires, and concerns: By the second year of our five-year project, academic achievement increased, chronic absenteeism decreased, and school climate improved in all three of the Maine schools we worked with. Students reported at much higher rates that they felt listened to by the adults around them, that they felt safe, and that they mattered.

A child's sense of safety, or their readiness to learn, is not entirely within our control. We need to remain open to what children tell us they know, to believe in their capacity to be experts on their own experience, and to be willing not only, as researcher and sociologist Jessica Taft says, "to imagine childhood otherwise" (2019, p. x), but to reshape our practices and policies to account for such reimagination. By doing so, children can impact the way things usually go in schools and recreate their school ecology so that it reflects them, works for them, and contributes to their well-being.

Reflect & Discuss

What are some simple, fun, but effective ways to empower students in your school to be decision makers?

In what ways are students taking on leadership roles at your school? How can you create more space for this?

What would your "Someday" wish be?

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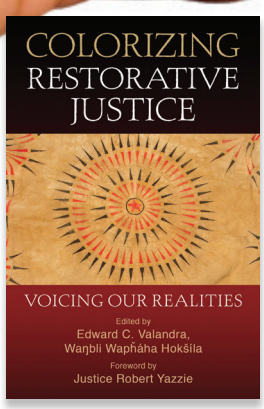
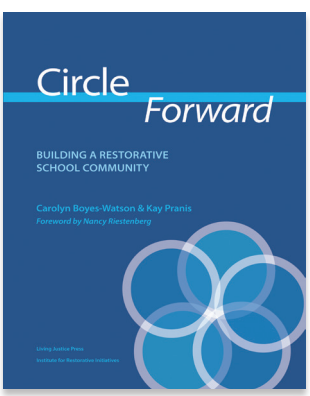
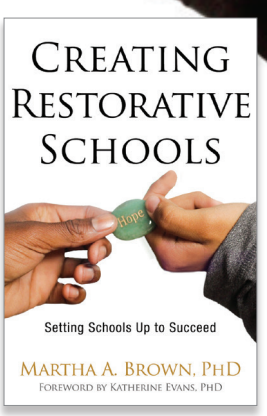
Catharine Biddle is an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine. **Lyn Mikel Brown** and **Mark Tappan** are professors of education at Colby College. All three are codirectors of the Rural Vitality Lab and coauthors of *Trauma-Responsive Schooling: Centering Student Voice and Healing* (Harvard Education Press, 2022).

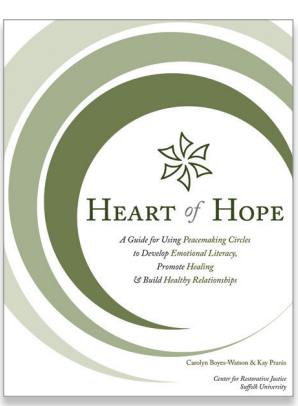
"Circles strengthen relationships. By promoting social-emotional learning, Circles create an environment of joy and belonging—a place everyone wants to be."

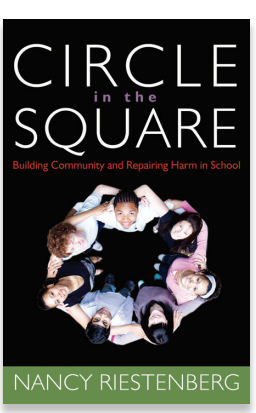
—Kay Pranis

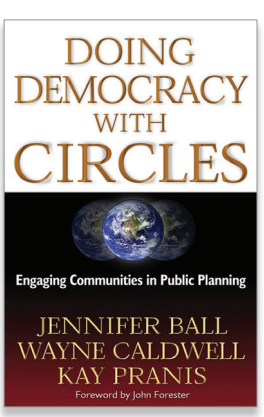


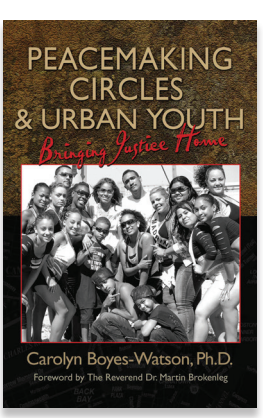












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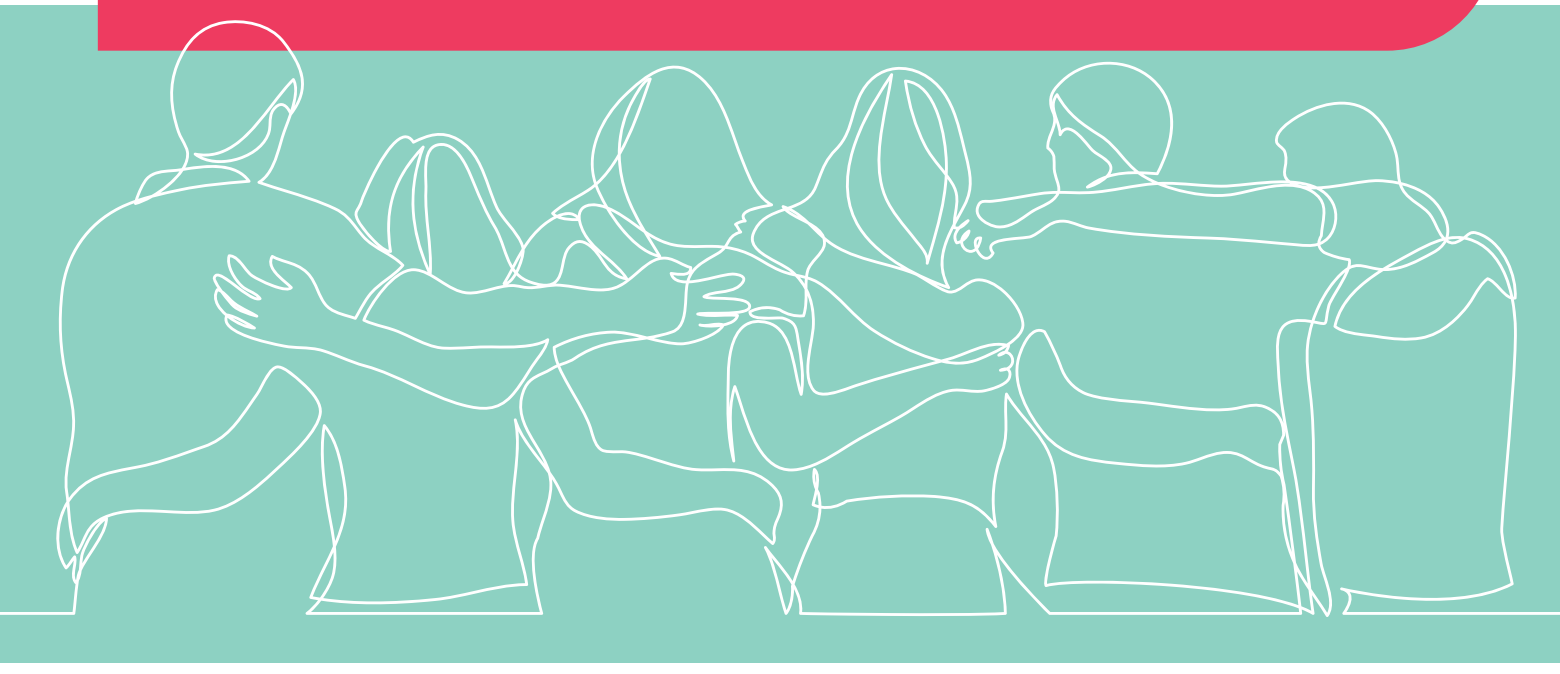
The Right Mindset for Responding to Student Trauma



Students are struggling with health and wellness like never before. Creating a culture of safety centered around relationships can help.

Pete Hall and Kristin Souers

We know that childhood trauma has become an epidemic. No one is immune."

We wrote these words back in 2016, in our book *Fostering Resilient Learners* (p. 23). Even three years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, we were seeing an uptick in student and staff struggles in schools. Excessive demands and lack of resources, coupled with outside stressors and traumatic experiences, had taken a toll on everyone's mental health and well-being.

The pandemic's catastrophic effects—deaths, school closures, social isolation, hotly debated health measures and mandates, financial insecurity, and more—have only worsened the situation. According to the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Report of youth surveyed in the first half of 2021, more than 2 in 5 teens reported feeling "persistently sad or hopeless," and nearly 20 percent had "seriously considered

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committing suicide" (Jones et al., 2022). It's no wonder that last October, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association collaboratively declared a "national state of emergency in children's mental health" (2021).

Our kids are struggling. A lot. These concerns present educators with an urgent question: Are we doing right by our youth?

The Struggle Is Real

As we know through the headlines and our personal experiences, it's not just students who are struggling. Education professionals, too, are overwhelmed and exhausted. In our work with schools, we hear concerns about student attendance, student behaviors, and lack of empathy, as well as trouble reconnecting with students. Many educators are feeling immense pressure to try to cram three years of schooling into one and to manage the public's fear of "learning loss"—all while attempting to manage their own health risks and emotional difficulties.

In short, many of us often feel at a loss now for how to move forward. There was no playbook for how to operate in education during a pandemic. Many districts independently made choices they felt were in the best interest of their communities—solutions which looked vastly different from state to state, county to county, district to district. That lack of predictability and consistency significantly affected educators' ability to take care of themselves and to figure out what students need.

Even in the most challenging and difficult of times, our mindsets can affect the outcomes.

If there were ever a time to truly focus on the social-emotional well-being of our youth, the time is now. We believe in the power of bringing the human element back to the forefront of education: building a safe environment, tending to relationships, and shifting our mindsets toward meaningful interactions with the children under our care.

A Culture of Safety

There is good news hidden on the B-side of the CDC survey results. According to the data, students who felt close to people at their school had dramatically lower prevalence of poor mental health (a 37-percent reduction), fewer persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (a 33-percent reduction), and fewer reports of attempted suicide (a 51-percent reduction) (Jones et al., 2022). Quite simply, those with strong relationships at school developed resilience to help them withstand stressors. This validates what we already know: Relationships

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matter in schools. A lot.

The quality of teacher-student relationships has been repeatedly proven to have a key impact on overall academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Košir & Tement, 2014). As Rita Pierson phrased it in her iconic 2013 TED Talk, "Kids don't learn from people they don't like."

If we know that relationships and connections make an enormous difference in our students' well-being, what can we do to ensure that every child we interact with hears the message that they are valued, important, capable, and loved? All of the students we serve should feel that security when they cross over our thresholds.

In our book *Relationship, Responsibility, and Regulation* (Hall & Souers, 2018), we refer to creating a "Culture of Safety," an environment that is physically and emotionally safe, predictable, and consistent. The relational connections that are so central to supporting students' well-being cannot take place without this.

A Culture of Safety is a setting that weaves together these three characteristics:

1. *Safety*. Our students need to experience both physical and emotional safety, a sense of freedom from danger—real and perceived—in order to settle into the classroom and become learning-ready. From adequately supervising students and vigilantly locking hazardous material away from reach, to enthusiastically celebrating our differences, checking in with our students on a regular basis, and openly communicating about how we are doing, educators can emphasize safety.

2. *Predictability*. Our students must have routines, conditions, and schedules that allow them to know what's coming up next. This alleviates the worry that accompanies the unknown. We can do this by establishing community agreements, posting the class agenda, and preparing students for changes in advance.

Students learn better when they make connections—with the content, with their teacher, with prior knowledge, with each other, with a goal, and with emotion.

3. *Consistency*. Our students must be immersed in settings that are consistent, equitable, and fair in order to meet our expectations for behavior, academics, and social growth. We can do this by providing clear expectations, highlighting the purpose for learning, and encouraging a growth mindset.

Mindsets in Service of Healing

Creating cultures of safety and connection for students also depends on our own ways of responding to challenges. Building relationships starts with us, the adults. According to psychologist Susan David, our self-stories—the way we manage our everyday thoughts and emotions—are powerful influences on how we approach situations (2016). Our mindsets and our ability to self-regulate matter. What we can control when we walk into an experience with another is the belief set we hold as we engage: our mannerisms, our implicit and explicit messages, and our words. When we enter with positive intent and a desire for solutions—and when students know that someone cares and they have opportunities to succeed, our (and their) successes will be more likely. Conversely, if we enter those interactions with a negative mindset, dysregulation, and the belief that nothing will help, odds are we will contribute to the problem, not the solution.

Imagine you are at the front of a classroom, and some students are chatting away and off-task as you start the lesson. Regardless of how many times you try to get students' attention, the students continue to drift back toward talking. Think about the difference in how the following reflections might end up, based on two different mindsets:

Mindset A:

"This class is out of control. I don't know how much more of this I can take. No one listens and no one cares about the content. How am I supposed to catch students up?"

Mindset B:

"This has been a really challenging transition back to in-person teaching. It is obvious how much these students have missed interacting, but their social development is lacking. I need to find a way to help them be productive learners and still have time to chat. I am going to start the class with a chance for us to connect and see how things are going before I jump into the content."

Even in the most challenging and difficult of times, our mindsets can affect the outcomes. When we're struggling with a student, a parent, a team, a colleague, a supervisor, or even a community stressor, it's important to become aware of our mindsets and self-talk so we can engage in a more positive manner. For example, we can ask ourselves these questions:

- Am I open to the possibility that this situation will get better, or am I stuck on the problem?
- What is about to drive my behavior? What am I trying to accomplish?
- Am I accessing my growth mindset, or am I closing myself off to solutions?
- What is the goal of this interaction? In the best-case scenario, what would happen as a result?

When those with whom we are struggling see us as motivated to repair and heal, it sends a message to them that we want better. For us to have difficult conversations with others, we need to start by having some hard conversations with ourselves. This will equip us with the dispositions to be seen as trustworthy, loving allies to our students, families, and teammates, which is a strong foundation for a creating a Culture of Safety.

Join the authors for their Trauma-Invested Institute, 30+ sessions around trauma-informed learning available to participants from June 1 through August 31, 2022.

Putting Care at the Forefront

Children seek out people who will meet their current needs, whether it's validation, reassurance, support, relationships, structure, guidance, or play. They need to know that we see them and that they matter. We need to ensure that message is at the forefront of every interaction in order for productive learning and growth to occur.

There are some small steps we can take to relay that message. While the following suggestions might seem overly simplistic, we've found in our work in schools that doubling down on them now can make a difference:

- Greet students at the door.
- Check in and ask how their day is going.
- Acknowledge a concern if you have one: "I've noticed lately that you seem a little down, is there anything I can do to help?"
- Follow through on past conversations: "I just wanted to check back with you and see if that assignment we worked on last week is making more sense?"
- Laugh and delight with each other.
- Be willing to be flexible and adaptable.

The Safety to Thrive

Our students are stressed, and understandably so; nevertheless, our expectations can remain high. When we focus on relationships, learning follows. Students learn better when they make connections—with the content, with their teacher, with prior knowledge, with each other, with a goal, and with emotion. It's important to remember that SEL and academics aren't two separate tracks; in fact, as Kristin often says, "It's one freakin' train, folks!"

We don't teach or lead effectively if we don't feel OK, and our students don't learn if they don't feel safe. Let's start from within. We can take steps to build a Culture of Safety for every student, helping them survive, learn, thrive, and soar.

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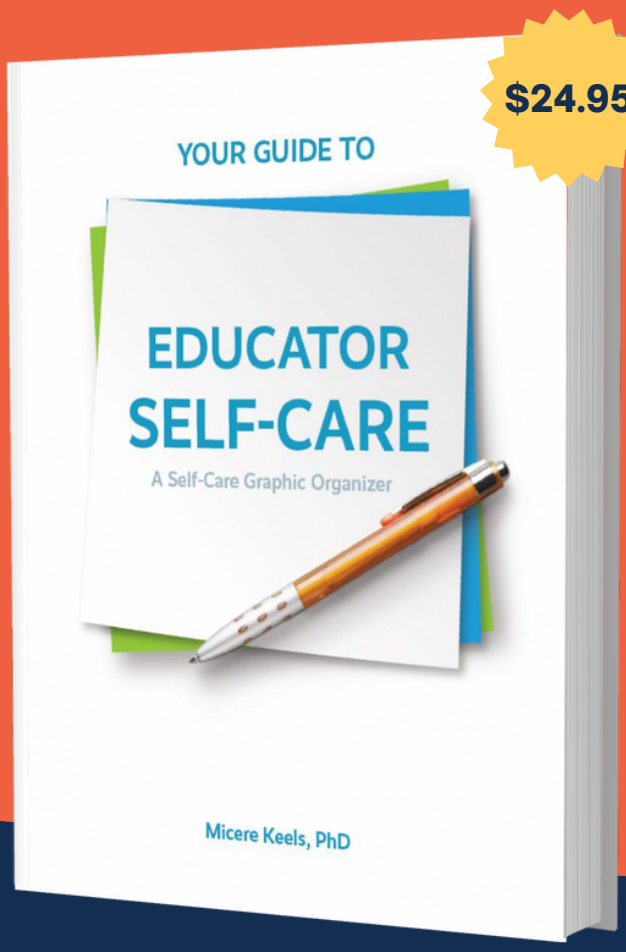
MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS COPING WITH TRAUMA



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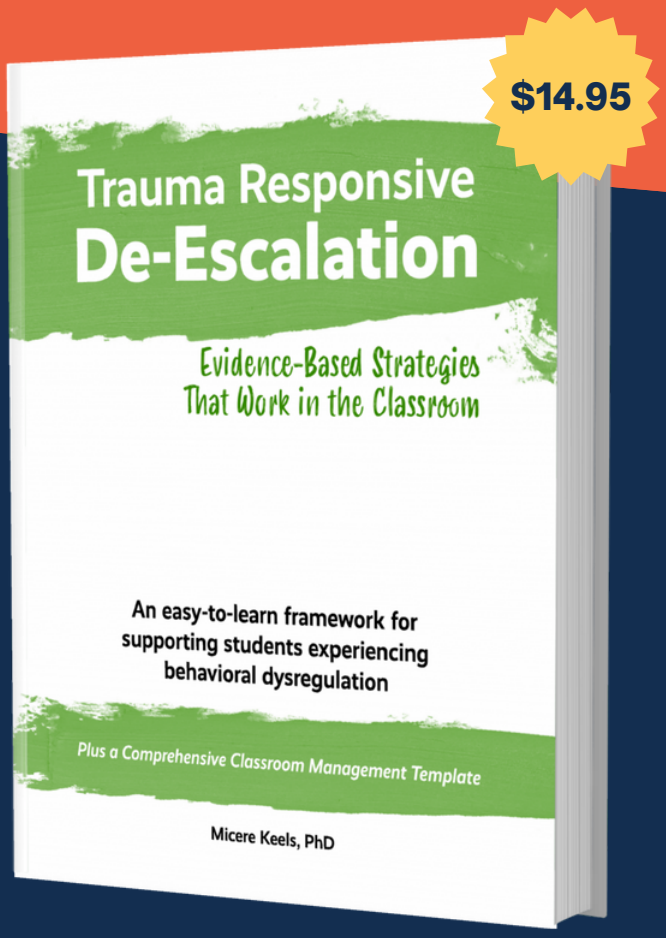

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Making Time for Well-Being

How to use the school schedule to support greater connection and balance.

Sarah Miles, Denise Pope, Jennifer Curry Villeneuve, and Samantha T. Selby

Henry David Thoreau once said, "It is not enough to be busy. . . . The question is what are we busy about?" As Thoreau reminds us, how we spend our time is a function of our values—and how time is allocated during the school day reflects what is important to the community, intentionally or unintentionally.

In the past two years, schools have faced the herculean task of attending to students' physical and mental well-being while attempting to engage them in meaningful learning. Educators have added vital resources and tools for students and school staff, such as social-emotional learning programs, increased counseling and clinical support, and incorporating coping strategies like meditation and breathwork into the school day.

These resources and tools can be very powerful for many individuals in building and helping them maintain their sense of

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well-being. However, an important aspect of improving and sustaining the well-being of an entire school community is also to make changes at the system level. In times of chaos and uncertainty, people crave stability and security. The use of time in school has the potential to shape the quality and the quantity of the experiences students, staff, and families have each day with each other and individually.

What Do We Need for Well-Being?

If we turn to self-determination theory to help us understand how to support positive physical and mental health for people of all ages, life experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, we can see that human beings have a universal need for autonomy, competency, and relatedness. People are more likely to feel a sense of well-being when they can make decisions that are aligned with their interests, feel a sense of mastery and purpose, and are connected to others (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Over the past 15 years, we at Challenge Success, a nonprofit school reform organization affiliated with Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, have conducted student, faculty and staff, and parent surveys with school communities to dig deeper into well-being and engagement in schools. Through these surveys, we glean important insights into the areas of well-being that may be working well for students and staff, as well as those that may need to be strengthened. We share our analyses with school teams and discuss the implications of the findings on school practices and policies.

Findings from our 2021–22 school year surveys, revealing the effects of pandemic-related disruptions on students, show a need for schools to make changes in areas specifically related to autonomy, competency, and relatedness. In our work with schools, we share school-specific data similar to that in Figure 1 to inform our discussions with school leaders about the importance of supporting student and staff connection, engagement, and autonomy. In our experience, when students and staff do not feel like they can be themselves at school or do not have a trusted person to turn to when they have a problem, it suggests educators need to increase focus on school belonging and connection. When students are not engaged with their classes or feel like their learning focuses more on performance and less on improvement and understanding, and when teachers report fewer opportunities to connect learning to the real world, this represents a potential problem with overload and lack of time to promote mastery. And when students and staff feel like they are not given ample opportunities for voice, choice, and decision-making in schools, this points to a need to increase autonomy and agency.

In times of chaos and uncertainty, people crave stability and security.

The Schedule: Reflecting What's Important

While there are many levers in a school system that impact student and staff well-being, the school schedule impacts *all* stakeholders at the school on a daily basis, making it an essential component in addressing the well-being of the school community.

When we talk about the "school schedule," we are referring to multiple levels of time spent during the school day. First, there is the schedule that occurs between the start of the school day in the morning and the end of the school day, including after-school activities and meetings. Then there is the cadence of the school year—the start and end, when breaks and exams occur, as well as other considerations about the use of time. Though some aspects of the school schedule may not be within a school's control, the design of any schedule is ultimately a reflection of the school community's values and priorities. Opportunities abound to restructure big and small increments of time in schools so the schedule aligns more appropriately with educators' goals to create healthier youth and adults.

FIGURE 1. Sample Challenge Success Survey of Student and Teacher Experiences

Students 21,799 high school students 13,346 middle school students	**School Staff** 1,962 faculty and staff
CONNECTION & BELONGING	
66% of high school and 68% of middle school students feel they have an adult to go to at school if they have a personal problem.	84% of school staff have a colleague to go to if they have a personal problem.
32% of high school students and 29% of middle school students do not feel like they can be themselves at school.	13% of school staff do not feel like they can be themselves at school all or most of the time.
ENGAGEMENT & MASTERY	
High school students: 12% disengaged; 54% doing school (doing the work but not finding it enjoyable or meaningful); 10% fully engaged Middle school students: 6% disengaged; 35% doing school; 23% fully engaged	32% of teachers report that they never coordinate with their colleagues to ensure deadlines for major projects or assessments are spread out. 51% of teachers have provided students opportunities to connect their learning to their experiences outside of the classroom at least twice a month.
60% of high school students report that most or all of their classes focus on improvement. 59% of high school students report that in most or all classes the main goal is understanding the material.	79% of school staff often/always enjoy their job. 78% of school staff often/always find their job interesting. 80% of school staff often/always find their job meaningful.
AUTONOMY & AGENCY	
15% of students participate in decision making on curriculum at least 2–4 times/year.* 30% of students participate in decision making on school policies at least 2–4 times/year.* *data collected from faculty/staff on student behavior	65% of staff participate in decision making on curriculum at least 2–4 times/year. 48% of staff participate in decision making on school policies at least 2–4 times/year. 23% of teachers report that they have never provided opportunities for students to choose topics or skills to focus on in class and 22% of teachers do this at least twice a month.

Source: Challenge Success, 2022: https://challengesuccess.org/take-a-survey/

So how can schools use the school schedule to deepen connections, promote greater autonomy, and allow for more experiences of mastery and deep engagement? The examples we share below come directly from our work at Challenge Success with middle and high schools during this challenging year.

Using School Time to Deepen Connections

The organization of time in the school schedule can facilitate or impede connections between and among the school staff and students. Here are some ways we have seen schools use time to deepen connections and foster greater belonging:

■ *Lunch periods*. Today, not all schools have a designated lunch period, while many that do don't allow sufficient time or protect it as necessary down time. Ensuring that students and adults alike have a specific time for lunch allows everyone to take a break, slow down, see friends, and "break bread" together. It places a value on stopping to fuel your body and allows for more peer-to-peer, and student-to-faculty connection.

■ *Time for advisory*. High-quality advisory programs, where small groups of students meet regularly with an adult advisor, can foster students' need to feel known. They can be "safe spaces" for students to share struggles and support each other. Typically, the most effective advisory programs follow either a formal or informal curriculum plan that includes sample lesson ideas and intended outcomes, as well as some professional training or a guidebook for all advisors prior to the start of the school year on how best to support students' well-being. Advisory can meet daily or weekly, but the bell schedule should allow ample time (between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on frequency) to ensure meaningful interaction. Some schools have converted the "old" homeroom concept into effective advisory time, but it needs to be longer than the typical 10-minute homeroom that is mostly used to take attendance or listen to announcements.

Well-being in school doesn't just happen; it has to be made a priority.

■ *Tutorial or office hours*. Many schools offer a tutorial or study hall period during the day to allow greater access to teachers and other supports.

Well-Being in Practice

After noticing how few students interacted at lunch or even took breaks during the day, one Challenge Success high school changed its bell schedule to allow for students to share a common lunch period with a diverse mix of their peers. Before this change, students had no formal lunch time—they just squeezed in lunch whenever they had a free period (and some of them didn't have one!). A common lunch period promoted a stronger sense of belonging and connection, allowed students time to eat with their friends, and created space for planned activities at lunch that attracted a much higher percentage of students. As the principal shared in one of our surveys:

> We didn't have a lot of student culture [building] during lunchtime. In fact, it was a little bit of a ghost town. [The change in schedule] forced them to use those minutes for lunchtime to just relax and to be with their friends, rather than continue their day and do their homework. It helped our culture quite a bit because now we have student activities at lunchtime.

In another schedule change, schools conducted "connection audits" in which they matched staff to students with whom they already had a strong relationship. These connection matrices often revealed which students might be in danger of falling through the cracks. Schools used advisory time to ensure these students could have more frequent and consistent interactions with a caring adult.

Time for Mastery and Engagement

Students and adults need time during the school day to focus, to practice what they have learned, and to reflect. When they have short class periods with little time between classes, they are less likely to experience multiple modalities of teaching and learning, ask questions, or find time to reflect on their learning. As a result, their sense of mastery and academic engagement may suffer.

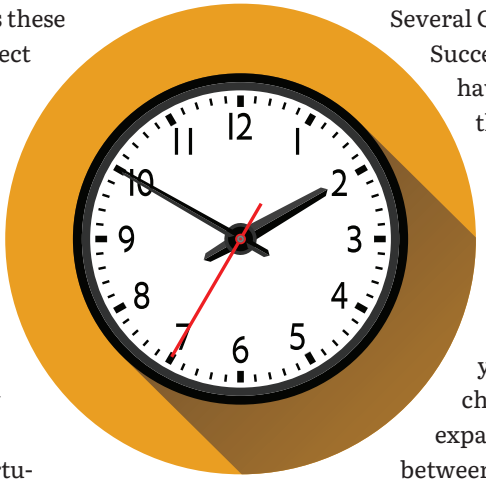
Some ways schools might find time to give students these opportunities to reflect and solidify their learning include:

■ *Longer class periods*. Longer periods allow for varied modalities of instruction and learning, such as individual work or group time. Mastery learning requires reflection and opportunities for questions. Typical class periods often deprioritize these aspects.

■ *More time between classes*. It is exhausting to switch gears from one topic and group dynamic to another. Schools can incorporate adequate time for students and teachers to make those transitions and slow down the pace of the day.

■ *Test and project calendars*. Students often complain that they are "slammed" with tests and due dates on certain days or weeks. A calendar for major assignments and assessments in each course can reduce overload and emphasize mastery by allowing sufficient time for students to study and prepare.

■ *Later school start time*. Later start times for school account for adolescents' circadian rhythms and allow them to experience morning learning while in a more awake state. This is also a good reason to alternate which classes students attend first period and to eliminate a "zero" period, a class which is offered before the start of the school day.



Well-Being in Practice

Several Challenge Success schools have noted that the pace of their school day was contributing to student and staff stress. They made simple yet significant changes by expanding the time between classes known as the passing period. Some schools lengthen passing time from 5 minutes to 8 or 10, while others try to reduce back-to-back classes by incorporating breaks, lunchtime, or advisory in between, which can reduce the amount of passing time needed in the school day. While it's admittedly complicated to try to find any extra time in an already-packed academic schedule, these changes decrease the "hustle and bustle" of the day, decrease disciplinary issues in hallways, and increase instructional time because students and teachers are more settled when class begins.

As one principal shared, "As minor a tweak as [having longer passing periods] seemed to be at the time, it has changed just how our kids feel and act on campus." Another said:

> We had a two-minute passing period. Kids would burst out the doors, they would run to their next class. There wasn't time to use the restroom or to get a drink of water or say hi to their friends. It was just, *move!* And even us, as the adults, were like, "Come on, you guys, you can make it." [When we extended the passing period] we talked to the students and said, "We're doing this so that you have less stress and [more] time to do what you need to do. You have time to breathe between classes and make that cognitive shift, maybe from science to history." Everybody was able to really de-stress. We had a lot less tardies, not surprisingly.

Promoting Agency and Autonomy

When students and faculty can control how they use their time and have opportunities to make decisions and choices aligned with their needs and interests, they are more likely to thrive. Healthier schedules prioritize choice in courses whenever possible and time for extracurricular activities without trading off student and staff sleep. Students and staff value free time during the day where they can choose how best to spend it.

Some elements of the school schedule where educators might better promote agency and autonomy include:

■ *Electives*. Electives give both students and teachers the freedom to choose to take or teach what they are interested in and enjoy doing.

■ *Extracurriculars*. Many students participate in extracurricular activities

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primarily for intrinsic reasons, and participating in extracurriculars can be linked to well-being. However, we do know that "too much of a good thing" is a real possibility. It is important that practices and meetings are not occurring late into the night or early in the morning.

■ *Flexible time*. Free periods allow students and staff the ability to prioritize meaningful tasks without the need to wait until after school hours to get homework, grading, or prep work done. Some schools require students to physically be in a classroom during flex times to have them count toward instructional minutes; other schools find ways to account for instructional minutes via longer course periods and electives, thereby allowing kids to spend flex time wherever they want.

■ *Weekends and breaks*. Rest and recovery are essential parts of learning. No-homework weekends or breaks, as well as scheduling exams before breaks (as opposed to after) are examples of practices that emphasize rest and recovery.

Well-Being in Practice

Another change students and parents report appreciating the most are homework-free holidays or weekends. These schoolwide policies communicate support for what we call PDF: playtime, downtime, and family time.

As this middle school principal shared, a little goes a long way:

> We began exploring the concept of homework-free nights as recommended by Challenge Success. We tried several last spring, and you would have thought that we were handing out gold candy bars. Parents and students that are hard to impress were like, "This is genius!" That's been a huge game-changer for us and an easy win, and the students felt heard.

Another school district recognized the need for students and families to have a break over holidays. School leaders sent the following message to emphasize why they were promoting the break from homework:

> Our high school faculty have made a commitment to support well-being. We will not be assigning homework this year for Thanksgiving, winter, and spring holidays. The hope is that students can take this opportunity to spend time with their families, work on hobbies, read a book for pleasure, and/or finalize college applications. We are very excited about this proactive approach to reduce student stress and workload. Enjoy your time!

A Key Lever for Well-Being

Well-being in school doesn't just happen; it has to be made a priority. How we use time in schools can be a key lever to promote whole-school-community well-being—particularly at this moment of heightened chaos and uncertainty. The schools we work with have found success with both large and small changes to their school schedules to emphasize well-being for everyone. Promoting ample time to build strong connections, allowing for meaningful work, and increasing student and teacher agency and choice is all time well spent.

Reflect & Discuss

Does your school's schedule reflect well-being as a priority? Why or why not?

How does time affect your own well-being—either positively or negatively?

Do any of the schedule changes the authors mention seem like a doable option for your school? Which might be most effective in your setting?

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SELF-CARE Is Not Enough!

Teaching through the pandemic has been traumatic. Schools must now prioritize organizational well-being.

Mona M. Johnson

For more than two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken education leaders, teachers, and school systems on a professional roller coaster ride. With very little notice, educators across the United States had to shutter school doors, move into isolation and quarantine, establish universal approaches to virtual learning, and devise innovative ways students could continue to access meals the school usually provides. They've had to learn and implement unparalleled public

IRINA YEVTUSHENKO / ISTOCK

health mitigation strategies, and continuously reinvent day-to-day operational practices. Many districts closed and reopened classrooms several times and erected hybrid learning structures in the interest of reducing student and staff exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

During these years, K–12 educators worked tirelessly and were challenged in countless ways while living the frontline experience of responding to the global pandemic. Each has felt—and may continue to feel—wounded and weary. And leaders and teachers ran this gamut while navigating changing circumstances in their personal lives, too, which were often difficult.

Trauma—For Individuals *and* Systems

The reality is the pandemic affected many school leaders, teachers, and other professionals within the K–12 landscape in ways that can be considered traumatic. Trauma is defined as, "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022). By this definition, coping with this global pandemic has been traumatic for many people, most certainly including educators. And just like individuals, organizational *systems* can be affected by prolonged harmful or threatening circumstances—and the experience of COVID-19 has been traumatic to schools and districts throughout our country (and across the world). Two-and-a-half years in, the effects of this pandemic are taking a heavy toll on educators and on the schools they work in.

The prolonged stress of constant pandemic-driven changes in school systems has manifested for educators in three ways: burnout, moral injury, and compassion fatigue.

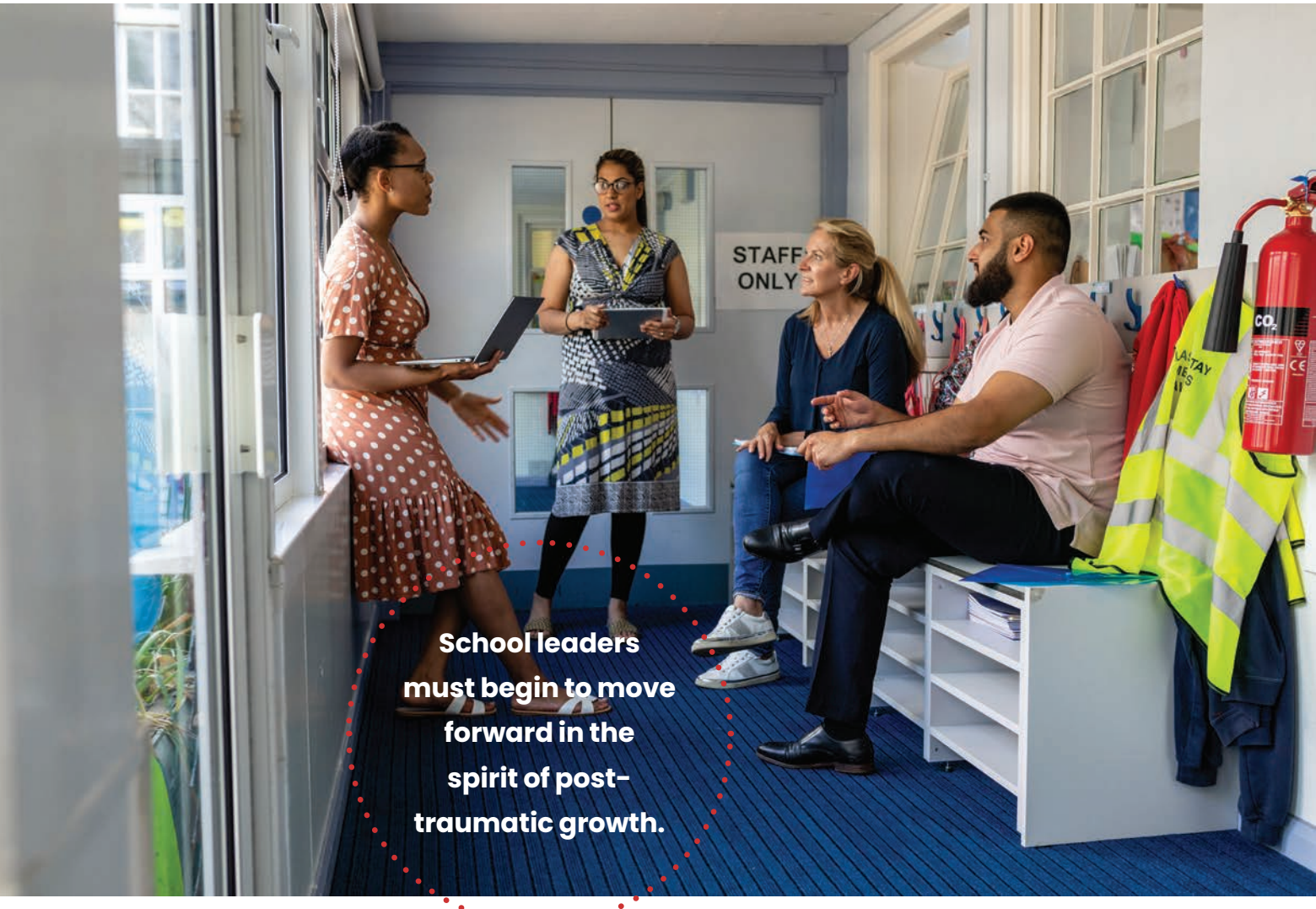
Burnout is "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (World Health Organization, n.d.). Burnout is often revealed in comments and conversations in school hallways, lunchrooms, and staff meetings in which educators articulate their experiences of energy depletion, feelings of emotional distance, pervasive negative or cynical thoughts, and fears of diminished effectiveness.

Emotions of *moral injury* are "strong feelings of guilt, shame, and anger about the frustration that comes from not being able to give the kind of care or service an employee wants and expects to provide" (Washington State Department of Health, 2020). Teachers have conveyed such feelings about enforcing isolation and social distancing on students as virtual learning shuttered schools and curtailed face-to-face engagement. Students lost out, and educators lost the direct engagement that is the cornerstone of effective instructional practice and, for many teachers, a source of great satisfaction. Educators at all levels felt helpless, too, when unable to comfort students who experienced pandemic-related family illness, trauma, and loss.

Compassion fatigue is the "natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowledge of a traumatizing event experienced by another and from wanting to help a suffering or traumatized person" (Beaton & Murphy, 1995). It's a weariness that comes from caring so much for someone who is suffering. Especially as it relates to the pandemic experience, compassion fatigue can manifest itself among K–12 educators as a sense of overwhelm, severe exhaustion, sleep disturbances, emotional dysregulation, boundary mismanagement, and physical and mental health-related concerns.

Toward Post-Traumatic *Growth*

Realizing that this pandemic has taken a toll on K–12 systems and educators, school leaders must take time now to reframe their perspectives and begin to move forward in the spirit of *post-traumatic growth*. Leaders need to acknowledge the wounding impacts of the pandemic while simultaneously finding and embracing any useful changes that could come from going through



School leaders must begin to move forward in the spirit of post-traumatic growth.

pandemic-related challenges. Now is the time to reflect on our experiences and make constructive adjustments, individually and systemically.

In this sense, school leaders have an opportunity, right now, to draw from educators' recent experiences to strengthen the effectiveness of K–12 organizational practices in ways we may never have imagined before the pandemic. As the pandemic starts to wane, we need to move away from believing that individual efforts toward wellness will be sufficient, that educator self-care practices, in and of themselves, can propel schools forward and out of this crisis of well-being. Individual self-care, albeit essential, isn't enough on its own. It's simply impossible for educators, as individuals, to self-care their way through the individual and systemic impacts of burnout, moral injury, and compassion fatigue. Education leaders must reaffirm their commitment to whole-organization wellness and shift their focus toward embedding well-being strategies within their organization to systemically support educators' well-being.

Organizational wellness implies that employees perceive that the relationships, policies, and social norms across their workplace support optimal wellness for everyone (Reynolds & Bennett, 2019). When individuals in an organization experience a commitment to systemic wellness, the operations,

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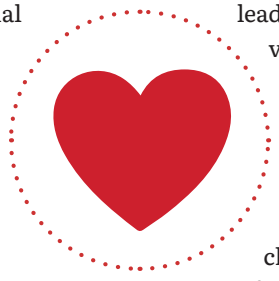
strategies, and culture of the organization fit together, make sense, and (most important) are healthy. There is minimal "politics" and confusion and high morale and productivity—and there is lower turnover (Lencioni, 2012).

As the director of a districtwide wellness and student support program, over the past few years I've seen a tremendous need for K–12 schools to implement more systemic well-being strategies. Today the need for institutional shifts is more evident than ever—and must begin as soon as possible to ease the pandemic-related impacts on K–12 districts and school cultures. Here are four places to start—three true shifts in practice schools should make and one area to invest in wisely:

- Start or rekindle an organizational sense of belonging for everyone in the school.
- Strengthen social-emotional competence in adult professionals.
- Promote an active understanding and practice of workplace self-regulation strategies.
- Invest in workplace well-being resources.



Until we make these institutional shifts to develop and reinforce whole educator well-being, our school systems can't move forward in constructive and healthy ways.

Toward Organizational Wellness

Creating a Sense of Belonging for All

Strengthening a sense of organizational belonging, the collective experience of fitting in, is the first institutional shift necessary to foster a wellness transformation in the workplace. Shawn Ginwright, professor at San Francisco University and author of *The Four Pivots*, has described belonging as "a mutual exchange of care, compassion, and courage that binds people together in a way that says you matter" (2022, p. 94). A sense of belonging in relationships and workplace communities is essential to both individual and systemwide well-being (Brown, 2021).

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the most active phases of the virus, the public health strategies of isolation, social distancing, and masking posed a significant, if unintended, barrier to belonging. The individual connections educators had had with one another and with their students were blocked. When social closeness is barred, and we're cut off from the power of human connections, systemic fractures and divisions begin to tear away at workplace belonging. This shows itself in the workplace as extreme impatience, overt irritability, emotional blunting, blaming, inadequate communication with one another, and even hostile behavior.

Institutional strategies that can rekindle a sense of belonging include:

- Doubling down on relationship-based leadership, which looks like giving individuals or groups undivided attention when meeting; intentionally asking colleagues/staff "how are you doing" and making time to listen closely to and offer real support specific to their response; and approaching staff behavior challenges with an empathetic perspective before reacting.
- Revisiting—as a whole school or in small groups—your school's mission statement and any statements of key behaviors and expectations for the school community.
- Doing strategic team-building with key leadership groups (such as department heads or the administrative team) through activities like reviewing strengths and weakness of existing day-to-day operational processes; engaging in data-driven goal and objective setting; and ongoing, applicable action planning. Team building strengthens relationships and trust and increases a sense of belonging.

Phyliss Fagell (2021) has said that since we've no manual for helping children thrive in the wake of a pandemic, "We can start by ensuring that everyone feels seen, nurtured, and valued." There is no manual for helping adults during these difficult times, either. But schools can start by prioritizing belonging, so all educators and staff feel seen, heard, and valued. We need to agree again to cooperate with one another, rebuild meaningful

connections, and make meaning together in the shared purpose and pursuit of K–12 education.

Strengthening Social-Emotional Competence

Social-emotional competence is the process by which individuals apply knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set goals, feel and show empathy for others, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2022a). Key elements of adult professional social-emotional competence are the ability to practice self-awareness and self-management, make responsible decisions, maintain and grow relationships, and practice social awareness (CASEL, 2022b).

The first step in practicing social-emotional competence in the workplace is having *self-awareness*, the ability to understand your emotions and thoughts and their influence on your behavior. At the core of self-awareness is the ability to successfully navigate emotions. Most of us think of work as being driven by skill sets, information, brainpower, experience, achievement, and accomplishment. However, emotions are the most powerful force inside the workplace, influencing everything from leadership effectiveness to innovation to customer relations. (Brackett, 2019). As we move forward in the post-pandemic journey, system-wide professional development focused on reinforcement of adult social-emotional practices, especially professional self-awareness and skillful emotion identification, is paramount.

Institutional shifts that allow educators to responsibly self-regulate can transform school cultures and contribute to organizational well-being.

Developing Self-Regulation Strategies

Awareness, acknowledgment, and practice of self-regulation strategies in the workplace is the third shift necessary to usher K–12 organizations forward in the pursuit of organizational wellness—and it's a crucial one. Bruce Perry, an author, teacher, clinician, and researcher in children's mental health and neuroscience, confirmed this insight, stating, "The single most helpful thing educational systems can do is to embed organizational care strategies into their systems, so educators are regulated" (Perry, 2022).

Dr. Perry is right. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the emotional brains (limbic systems) of K–12 leaders have been functioning on maximum alert, fight-or-flight, and survival mode. We have had to rapidly create and implement countless new day-to-day operational practices under great stress. No wonder many educators still often feel dysregulated—unable to adequately manage overwhelming emotions they experience at school, such as frustration or sadness. A teacher who's dysregulated during the day might have difficulty focusing and remembering details of assigned tasks or burst into tears in a collegial conversation.

The Neurosequential Engagement Model of Therapeutics (National Council for Adoption, 2022) integrates the principles of neurodevelopment and traumatology. This developmentally sensitive, neurobiology-informed approach holds that individuals cannot fully relate to or reason with others in their environments, including co-workers, until they can identify their own neurological dysregulation. Once they recognize any dysregulation, they can actively regulate themselves and establish neurological control from within.

Effective self-regulation practices are relational, relevant, repetitive, rewarding, rhythmic, and respectful (National Council for Adoption, 2022). Regulation strategies that work well in K–12 workplaces include breathing exercises; creative expression like drawing or writing; rhythmic movement, including singing and dancing; mindfulness and meditative breaks; reflective time-out practices; positive self-talk; and laughter. Schools should familiarize adults with these healthy coping strategies and set up systematic ways they can practice them when they begin to feel dysregulated or flooded with tension or emotion.

When educators become skilled at self-regulating in the workplace, they gain the ability to *coregulate* and help others soothe and manage their

distress. Practicing self-regulation, and in turn coregulation with students and colleagues, leads to an increased sense of safety, calm, and support during times of distress. Institutional shifts that allow educators to responsibly self-regulate can transform school cultures and contribute greatly to overall organizational well-being.

Providing Practical Supports

In addition to the institutional shifts indicated here, K–12 systems should invest in practical workplace supports for whole-educator well-being, including:

- Employee Assistance Programs to help educators access mental health, financial, legal, and other related services.
- Access to quiet, calming spaces in which educators can practice mindfulness and remain self-regulated, and a system through which they can go to such a space briefly as needed.
- Expertly facilitated educator well-being support groups to focus on professional well-being and shared experiences and learn professional and personal wellness skills.

Repurposing district budget allocations aimed at supporting educator professional development or partnering with community mental health providers are two creative ways districts can fund innovative educator well-being support groups.

The Power of Leaders

As school systems make shifts like these that support educator wellness, it's important to remember the power and responsibility education leaders have to model healthy professional well-being. By transparently engaging in practices to support their own physical, emotional, social, occupational, and spiritual wellness—and letting their vulnerability show—leaders can set an example for others, foster a culture of belonging, and contribute to the positive sense of well-being urgently needed in K–12 classrooms, schools, and districts nationwide.

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Re-Framing Teen Stress

Teenagers are facing an epidemic of stress. With care and connection, educators can help them cope.

Abby Wills

How can schools nurture well-being in teenagers? The question looms as dire statistics regarding adolescent health, including alarming rises in suicidality rates, continue to make headlines. Adolescents at this stage of life are becoming more cognizant of life's big questions, and they are pondering their purpose in a world laden with violence and inequity. With interruptions in education and social engagement due to COVID-19, negative effects of social media, a lack of sleep, homework, worries about their future, and financial concerns, teens face daily challenges that have real implications in our classrooms.

The hard truth is that 83 percent of adolescent students report school as a main stressor (Smith, 2020). Solutions are within reach, but they require us as educators and

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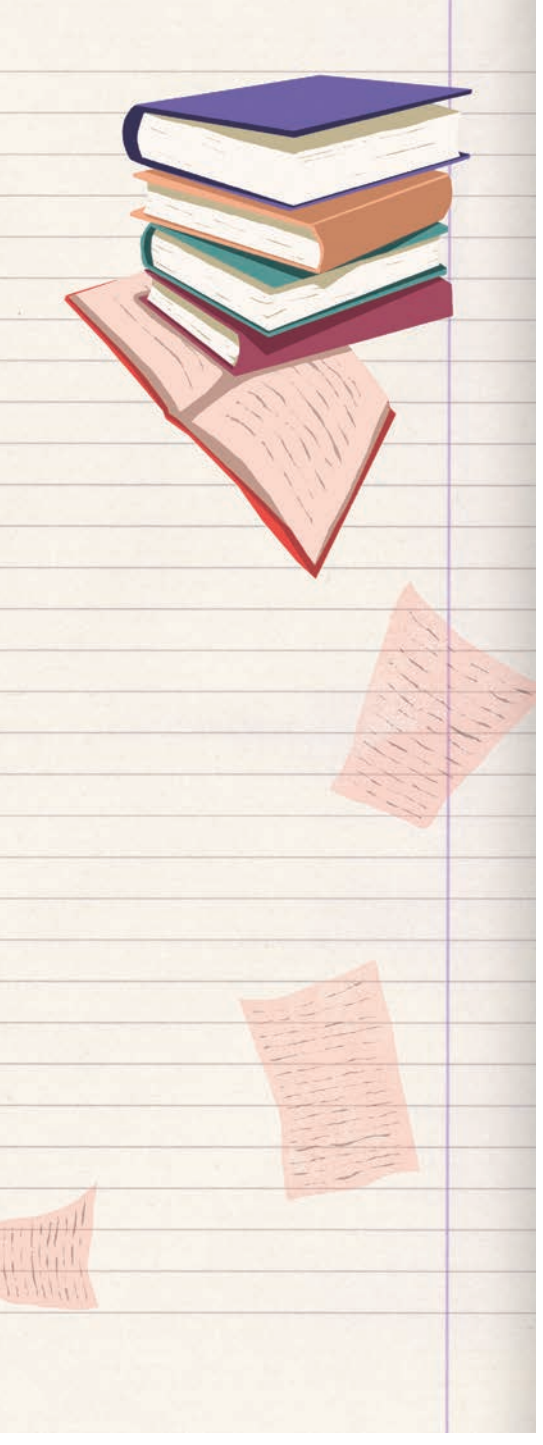

administrators to get curious and act boldly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) report that adolescent mental health is bolstered when teens feel a sense of connection to school and to each other. As educators, we can help students feel more connected. With a critical, contemplative approach, we can empathetically acknowledge the problem through a historic and systemic lens, reflectively inquire into solutions in collaboration with students, and equip our classrooms with practices to nourish long-term well-being.

I call this three-part process AIR:

1. **A**cknowledge stress with empathy.
2. **I**nquire with compassion into sources of stress and possibilities for regulation.
3. **R**esource systems for equanimity and recovery.

Let's look more deeply at how this process can work in schools.

The Problem of Systemic Stress

Before looking at practices that can help students manage their stress, we must first acknowledge that the problem is bigger than them. The perception that stress is a problem for *students*—a challenge they must self-regulate and "get over"—misses the root issues. Rather than attempting to fix students, schools that nurture student health are committed to taking a hard look at the policies and practices eroding well-being in the first place. As Chris Emdin asks in his book *Ratchetdemic*, "When will we recognize that even mindfulness, socio-emotional learning, and restorative practices, if nested in the perception that the youth are broken, will only serve to maintain the existing structure?" (2021, pp. 157–158). Only organizational practices nested in compassion and criticality can transform structures.

And yet, school districts continue to implement practices that are antithetical to current research-based understanding of the science of learning, as well as deeply held wisdom on the art of teaching. Inequitable standardized high-stakes practices and policies are prime examples. Not only do testing regimes often run counter to science and wisdom, they can be intensely stressful for many students. Our systems are, as professor of education Patricia A. Jennings (2022) clearly puts it, "completely outmoded and becoming so dysfunctional that students and school staff are being stretched to the breaking point."

We continue to waste an exorbitant amount of instructional time on testing while educators report consistently that they feel they have little to no time to attend to classroom well-being. If COVID-19 taught us anything, it's that change in educational practices does not have to be slow as molasses. We all engaged in swift change to meet our collective health needs when a deadly virus swept the globe. Adolescent mental health is equally as crucial to address. As we boldly acknowledge and drop practices and policies that are unhealthy, we can make time for what matters

most. A culture of care grows from a commitment to centering students' well-being and organizing the academic experience around it. Schools that give the time needed for effective well-being practices necessarily break down one of the most precarious misconceptions in unhealthy systems: that there is not enough time for health.

Empathetic Acknowledgment

Changes at the system level are essential, but that doesn't mean that educators cannot or should not help teens learn to effectively cope with stress on a smaller scale. To do so, I recommend beginning with the first step in the AIR process: Expressing empathy for what they are experiencing. Acknowledge that school can be ultra-stressful, especially during the pandemic. Acknowledge *them* for showing up and trying. Assume every student is doing their best given the conditions of their lives.

This acknowledgement of students' humanity is critical. As Gholdy Muhammad reminds us in her book *Cultivating Genius*, "Empathy is the essence of what it means to be human" (2020, p. 118). Humanizing our approach to stress recognizes that it is a complex, collective experience in which our perspectives, policies, and educational practices play a direct role.

So how does empathetic acknowledgment look in the classroom? For one, teachers can remind students that stress is a normal part of life, and that a *tolerable* amount of stress actually helps us grow and learn. Consider sharing about your experience with stress at school, as appropriate. This helps students hear that they are not alone in their experience, which promotes connectedness and empathy.

Along with acknowledging stress as it arises, remember to name students' resilience and aptitude in navigating the ceaseless stressors of life. Stress is not strictly a problem to be overcome. When we become more adept at noticing the signals of stress in the body, mind, and emotions, we can relate differently to it, seeing it as a message that more or less effort in a particular area may be needed to maintain well-being.

Welcome students' expertise, brilliance, and wisdom on what it means to be a teen right now.

The kinds of stress students experience are as diverse as the students themselves. *Eustress*, the healthy stress that motivates us to meet our potential, can be a signal to reach for our goals. Signs of distress in the body, like a racing heart, can be a message to slow down and rest. Acknowledging the complexity of stress and the intelligence of our body-mind systems in co-regulating stress is key to well-being.

Reflective Inquiry

Why is school so stressful for students? If you really want to know what will help teen students cope with stress, take the guesswork out and ask them. At every turn, pivot, and decision-making process possible, invite student input. Welcome their expertise, brilliance, and wisdom on what it means to be a teen student right now. Whether through surveys, student councils, classroom discussions, or anonymous feedback, engage youth fully in this move toward well-being.

We know that dysfunction in our school systems breeds when educators are not effectively included in decision making processes that directly and deeply effect their professional and personal well-being. This is true for our students as well. We must engage students in inquiry to reflect on solutions and be allies for them and their families to advocate for change.

We can also take time to hear students' thoughts on their experiences with stress at school. Encourage students to share their insights on the origins of their personal and collective stress, as well as ideas on how to manage it. *Where is this stress coming from? What can we do together to help bring us into more balance?* Ask them to name the aspects of school that are most stressful. Is it testing? Homework? Pressure to achieve? Peer relationships? How is stress manifesting physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially?

Look for opportunities to make connections between students' responses. Young peoples' connectedness is nurtured when students see they are not alone in their struggles and dreams. Likewise, take a strong stance of honoring differences, knowing that each student is living a different experience.

Once students are more aware of the characteristics and causes of their stress, they can apply *compassionate curiosity*. Ask them to brainstorm ideas for how your class or school can meet stress with care. For example, what actions or practices can the class engage in leading up to a test? How

about during and after testing? Invite students to imagine a school where people have the right amount of stress to achieve their dreams, but not so much stress that they feel defeated. What would that look like? Encourage students to answer openly and honestly. Let them know you will consider all ideas.

Continue to inquire with students over time about the specific sources of school stress. Guide them to reflect on solutions at regular intervals. With practice, students will more accurately identify stressors and start to discern solutions. This growing awareness and discernment contribute to what I like to call *stress intelligence*. Once we know the origins of our collective stress, we can work together toward solutions. Along the way, we need to consistently resource our systems with care.

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Collective Resourcing

Distress arises when we don't have, or don't perceive to have, adequate resources to handle the stressors we are experiencing. Collective resourcing means committing to regular, consistent practices to help restore energy, develop students' ability to modulate stress, and move toward vitality. It acknowledges how our personal well-being is connected to those around us. Resources may come through embodiment practices, contemplative arts, nature, relationships, imagery, sensory awareness, and more.

Once your class has co-generated solutions for stress relief, draw from their ideas. When possible, help your class enact their own wisdom. And remember, while teaching these skills is essential for supporting students in navigating daily stress, this strategy alone is inadequate and falls short when systemic stressors are not also dealt with.

Consider whether the following resourcing options might support your class in modulating stress:

- Nature—There is no substitute for the healing power of nature. Find a place on or near campus for your class to adopt. Facilitate inquiry and additional resourcing there, if possible. Or visit this place for a semi-structured break time. Encourage students to notice the elements of nature they encounter. Invite them to feel the earth beneath them and the sky above. Even 10–20 minutes outdoors can be significantly stress-relieving. If you cannot find a particular spot to spend time in, consider taking students on a walk instead.
- Fresh Air—The next best option to spending time in the great outdoors is to simply find some fresh air. In rainy or cold climates, a brief jaunt outside to breathe in fresh crisp air is refreshing and de-stressing. If you can, open the classroom windows and ask students to count their breathing cycles or encourage a particular number of breaths. Ten deep breaths is a good starting point.
- Water or Snacks—A common challenge for teens is getting enough nutrition and staying

hydrated when their stressful lives have them on the go and too much in their own heads. Recruit parents to supply fresh spring water and cut fruits and veggies to nourish students' bodies and brains during especially stressful times.

■ Breath—Encourage students to inhale normally, counting the inhale. Then, exhaling, extend the breath by a few counts. Repeat five to seven times. This is one of the most effective ways to release tension and complete a stress cycle.

■ Movement—Almost any movement that comes naturally can be helpful in alleviating stress and completing stress cycles. Try jumping, rocking, shaking, tapping, clapping, squeezing, or other rhythmic, repetitive movements.

■ Rest—Progressive full-body relaxation scripts and guided audio practices are abundantly available online. Offer students 10 to 20-minute breaks to place their bodies in the most comfortable positions they can given the circumstances (heads on desks, sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall). Play relaxing music. Yoga or exercise mats or towels come in handy for deeper relaxation.

■ Music—As a universal language, music can work wonders for co-regulation. Create a collaborative playlist with students to support a nurturing classroom container.

■ Play and Laughter—Make space for joy. Get to know what brings your students joy and share your joy as well.

Whatever modes of resourcing you offer, check in with students afterward for feedback. Did they find meaning and benefit? How would they suggest doing things differently next time?

The perception that stress is a problem for students misses the root issues.

Consistent, daily resourcing is essential to nurturing well-being. Imagine an education system where resourcing ourselves for compassion and connection is as non-negotiable as roll call.

But remember: While resourcing in classrooms is vital, it is not a stand-alone solution to the distress pervading our systems. When stressors that are out of our immediate control are identified, we need to also guide students to identify who is in control of the conditions and seek ways to communicate with them. Students may choose to schedule meetings with administration to discuss ways to alleviate stress on campus or attend school board meetings to advocate for specific changes. Be sure to recognize when referrals to student support staff, including counselors, psychologists, or other school-based mental health care providers, may be needed.

Integrating AIR

We can integrate AIR immediately, understanding that efficacy requires long-term implementation. As we normalize stress as a common human experience and involve students in the decisions that affect their well-being, they will feel more connection to each other and school. Within this connectedness, school can become a resource for teens; a place to know themselves beyond the stressful experience, a space for curiosity about what matters most in their lives.

This possibility hinges on our willingness and ability as educators and leaders to consciously perceive students as whole human beings functioning as best as they can in a confused world. Rather than being the main stressor in their lives, school can be full of zones of healing and belonging for adolescents. What could be more beneficial to students' long-term health than knowing they have resources and support to heal themselves as they work through their difficult emotions? Give yourself permission to imagine what a stress-intelligent school would feel like to you. Let that vision give purpose to making space for the healing benefits of acknowledgement, inquiry, and resourcing in your classroom.

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el Takeaways

Teachers cannot always know what challenges their students bring to school, but they can work to develop healthier school ecologies by creating opportunities for children to voice their needs and embrace their strengths.

—Catharine Biddle, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Mark Tappan, p. 48

If we want to recalibrate the metric for student success from "academic obsession" to focus more on well-being, we need to put well-being on equal footing with academic achievement.

—Cathy Vatterott, p. 26

First and foremost, acceptance and belonging must be a core element of your school community.

—Nita Creekmore and Michael Creekmore, p. 42

It's simply impossible for educators, as individuals, to self-care their way through the individual and systemic impacts of burnout … . Education leaders must shift their focus toward embedding well-being strategies within their organization to systemically support educators.

—Mona M. Johnson, p. 66

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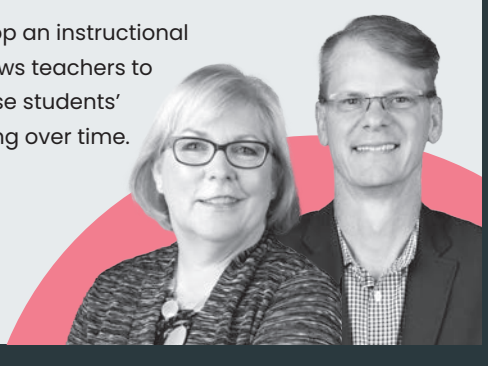

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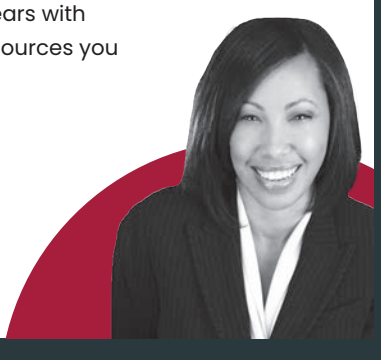

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