School Practitioner Listserv

29 years & counting

A Weekly Community of Practice Network for Sharing and Interchange

Mental Health in Schools
UCLA
Center
Program and Policy Analysis*

June 22, 2015

Request from a colleague

>*Promoting & supporting teacher/school staff wellness*

About Personalizing Staff Development & Support

Featured Center Resources

>*Staff Development Materials*
>*Monthly Themes to Aid in Reducing Burnout & Promoting Wellness*

Commentary from the Field

>*On "grit" and poverty*

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Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested. The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.

For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of the weekly exchange, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm

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Note: In keeping with the *2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*, this community of practice network has expanded in number of participants and topics discussed.* The thematic emphasis is on (1) daily concerns confronting those working in and with schools, (2) the transformation of student and learning supports, and (3) promoting whole child development and positive school climate.

Request from a colleague:

"I moved from the Counseling Dept in our district to Staff Assistance otherwise known as an internal Employee Assistance Program. I always had a hand in some staff "stuff", now I am working on teacher mental health. I have been putting out monthly newsletters to all of our staff on "wellness" topics. I want something for the educational profession on, for lack of a better topic line: Recharging your Emotional Batteries. There seems to be precious little on the support and/or restoration of teacher MH that I can find. Most searches take me to teachers as they support student MH. In my thinking, we often look at parent wellness for much of the key to a child's emotional composition but why not look at a teacher wellness? And if this is an area of study and I'm missing the correct key search words, can you forward me links etc to where I can start to drill into this for my newsletter? Thanks so much!!!"

Center Response: It's easy to overlook the psychological needs of staff. Yet, when school staff don't feel good about themselves, it is unlikely they will be effective in making students feel good about themselves.

Summer provides a great opportunity to plan ways to (a) minimize practices that hurt and (b) promote wellness for teachers and other school personnel, as well as for students and their families. Here are a few thoughts and a guide to some resources.

It is important to start by identifying and changing bad routines. In this respect, we always think about Milne's description of Winnie the Pooh coming downstairs:

> *Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.*

So take a deep breath and stop bumping.

Take some time to reflect on which routines are contributing to burnout. Identify bad routines that need eliminating. Altering such routines recognizes the reality that certain demands at school are major stressors and validates staff perceptions that the system needs to be improved.

Move on to think about how to ensure workloads are not staggering and daily problems are not overwhelming. Identify the many school-related frustrations, large and small, that play a major role in negatively affecting staff (and student) morale and mental health and lead to burnout.

The aims are to both (a) promote wellness and (b) address barriers to learning and teaching.* To these ends, schools must strive to create a caring, learning environment in which there is a strong collegial and support structure and meaningful ways to participate in decision making. This calls for well-designed and implemented mechanisms for
>inducting newcomers into the school in a welcoming and socially supportive way
>transforming working conditions by creating appropriate teams of staff and students who support, nurture, and learn from each other every day
>transforming student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students

>transforming inservice training into ongoing personalized staff development and
   support from day one at a school
>restructuring school governance to enable shared decision-making.

   *Extrapolating from the work of Ed Deci, Richard Ryan, and their colleagues, we think
   about promoting well-being in terms of reducing threats to and enhancing feelings of
   (a) self-determination, (2) competence, and (c) connectedness to significant others (see
   http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/domains/psychological-health-and-well-being-domain).

Resources: Over the years, some of the most accessed resources from our Center are those covering staff burnout. We recommend starting with the Center article on *School Staff Burnout* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/spring02.pdf. Then, use the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Burnout* to link to relevant resources listed there – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/burnout.htm.

Make it happen. After doing some reading, take a good look at next year's school improvement and staff development plans. Is there a strong focus on both preventing burnout and enhancing wellness? If current plans don't reflect a substantive and nonmarginalized concern for promoting well-being and addressing barriers to teaching and learning, now is the time to redress this oversight. Staff who bring a mental health and motivational perspective to schools can be asked to take a leadership role in planning and implementing ways to make the essential systemic changes.

Listserv Participants: What is being done in your local schools to prevent burnout and promote staff wellness? How does all this fit into planning for next year? We look forward to hearing and sharing. Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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About Personalizing Staff Development & Support

A key aspect of supporting staff involves expanding efforts to personlize staff development. And this is important not only for teachers, but for all personnel.

As with any learner, staff need instruction and support that is a good match for both their motivation and capabilities. Summer is a good time to review inservice efforts and enhance how they personalize staff support and guidance. Are individual interests, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations addressed and appropriate accommodations made? Do the experiences enhance and expand intrinsic motivation for continuous learning and problem solving?

Plan with a view to enhancing caring, supportive, and effective student learning. From this perspective, the following are a few examples of what staff need to learn:

• how to work collaboratively in the classroom with support staff and volunteers
• how to establish a classroom infrastructure that transforms a big classroom into
  a set of smaller units and personalizes interventions and bases specialized
  assistance on a student's responses to the personalized interventions
• how to move away from overreliance on extrinsics to an emphasis on intrinsic
  motivation
• how to prevent and address problems as soon as they arise
• how to establish a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning
  supports in the classroom and school-wide.

Plan ways for staff development to enhance resilience. One of the most important research findings related to good outcomes for children and youth is understanding that by enhancing protective factors or buffers, risks can be reduced and barriers overcome. This applies to adults as well. Promote resilience through personalized staff development that enhances personal motivation and capacities for continuous learning and problem-solving. Schools that do not promote resilience for staff are unlikely to promote it for students.

Plan ways to enhance collegial working relationships. David Hawkins and his colleagues stress the importance of strong bonds and suggest that these are built through
> (a) opportunities for meaningful involvement (ways to make a real contribution and feel valued for effort and accomplishment);
> (b) developing skills (social, cognitive, emotional, behavioral) that enable success,
> (c) recognition for involvement to motivate continued contributions.

Regular mentoring increasingly is recognized as essential. However, learning from colleagues is not just a talking game. It involves mentors in modeling and guiding change (e.g., demonstrating and discussing new approaches; guiding initial practice and implementation; and following-up to improve and refine). Depending on practicalities, such modeling for teachers could take place in a teacher's own classroom or be carried out in colleagues' classrooms. Some of it may take the form of team teaching.

All personalized contacts provide opportunities for increasing support and guidance, enhancing competence, ensuring involvement in meaningful decision-making, and attaining positive social status. All of which play a productive role in countering alienation and burnout.

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Featured set of Center Resources:

Staff Development Materials

To aid staff development, the Center has a wide range of resources that are online for free access. Some have been developed as quick training aids; others for workshop adaptation; and most can be used for independent study or by a "learning community.". For a list of specific resources, go to the section of website devoted to

> *>Guides to Policy and Program Development/Practice –*
> http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/materials/guidestopolicy.htm

With respect to staff development for developing a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports* at a school, see
> >the online 30 minute introductory webinar that offers a transformation blueprint for student/learning supports –
> > http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/powerpoint/briefintroslidesrec.pptx
> > (an accompanying set of handouts are online at
> > http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intropphandouts.pdf)

> >the brief guide entitled: *Beginning Steps in Personnel Development Related to Establishing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports*
> > http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personneldevelopment.pdf
> >For more in depth reading, there is the online book: *Transforming Student and*

Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/book.pdf)

Note that staff development focusing on learning supports is for *all* personnel:

- Teachers need to learn more about how to address interfering factors and to work with others in doing so
- Support staff need to learn more about how to work with teachers and other staff (and to do so in classrooms as much as is feasible), as well as learning how to work more productively with district and community resources to enhance practices for prevention and for responding quickly when common problems arise
- Administrators need to learn more about leading the way by expanding policy, enhancing operational infrastructure, and redeploying resources to ensure development of a comprehensive system of learning supports for addressing barriers to learning, development, and teaching

Monthly Themes to Aid in Reducing Burnout & Promoting Wellness

Schools have a yearly rhythm – changing with the cycle and demands of the school calendar. Special concerns regularly arise throughout the year. With this in mind, school improvement plans need to ensure that such concerns are well-addressed.

Clearly, every month, there are important opportunities for anticipating predictable problems and planning prevention and early intervention to minimize them. By pursuing such opportunities, schools enhance teachers' ability to do their job well.

Therefore, as such basic concerns arise throughout the year, school staff need to be proactive and timely in promoting a school-wide focus to address the concerns and minimize their impact on students, their families, and the staff at a school. Student support personnel, in particular, can play a major role in formulating and providing supports for implementing a theme of the month at schools throughout the district.

The Center has developed monthly school improvement themes and suggested resources that can contribute to reducing burnout and enhance wellness. See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/schoolsupport.htm .

Given the limited time a school has for personnel development, focusing on a different theme each month engages all stakeholders as a community of learners. Emphasizing a theme encourages doing some reading, discussions with colleagues, learning about additional resources from our Center and elsewhere. All this helps build capacity and can help in developing learning supports into a comprehensive system.

By fully integrating a theme of the month into school improvement planning, schools increase the likelihood of enhancing equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school and for making schools better places for all who spend so much of their lives there.

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Commentary from the Field

>On "grit" and poverty

With respect to why teachers need support in dealing with barriers to learning, a piece by Mike Rose caught our attention, and we are sharing an excerpt here. The banner states:

> *Why teaching kids to have ''grit'' isn't always a good thing:*
> *Character education is no substitute for improving poor students' lives*
> http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/ucla-faculty-voice-why-teaching-kids-to-have-gr
> it-isnt-always-a-good-thing

Excerpt:

> One of the many frustrating things about education policy and practice in our country is the continual search for the magic bullet and all the hype and trite lingo that bursts up around it. One such bullet is the latest incarnation of character education, particularly the enthrallment with "grit," a buzz word for perseverance and determination.... I fear that we will sacrifice policies aimed at reducing poverty for interventions to change the way poor people see the world.

> I would like to further explore these concerns by focusing on "grit," for it has so captured the fancy of our policy makers, administrators, and opinion-makers.

> Grit's rise to glory is something to behold, a case study in the sociology of knowledge. If you go back ten or so years, you'll find University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth investigating the role of perseverance in achievement. This idea is not new in the study of personality and individual differences, but Duckworth was trying to more precisely define and isolate perseverance or persistence as an important personality trait via factor analysis, a standard statistical tool in personality psychology....

> Duckworth and her colleagues did something that in retrospect was a brilliant marketing strategy, a master stroke of branding or re-branding. Rather than calling their construct "perseverance" or "persistence," they chose to call it "grit." Can you think of a name that has more resonance in American culture? The fighter who is all heart. The hardscrabble survivor. True Grit. The Little Train That Could.

> Grit exploded. New York Times commentators, best-selling journalists, the producers of "This American Life," Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, educational policymakers and administrators all saw the development of grit as a way to improve American education and, more pointedly, to improve the achievement of poor children who, everyone seemed to assume, lacked grit....

> The primary audience for our era's character education is poor kids. As I and a host of others have written, a focus on individual characteristics of low-income children can take our attention away from the structural inequalities they face. Some proponents of character education have pretty much said that an infusion of grit will achieve what social and economic interventions cannot.

> Can I make a recommendation? Along with the grit survey, let us give another survey and see what the relationship is between the scores. I'm not sure what to call this new survey, but it would provide a measure of adversity, of impediments to persistence, concentration, and the like. It, too, would use a five-point response scale: "very much like me" to "not much like me." Its items would include:

> - I always have bus fare to get to school.
> - I hear my parents talking about not having enough money for the rent.
> - Whenever I get sick, I am able to go to a doctor.
> - We always have enough food in our home.

- I worry about getting to school safely.
- There are times when I have to stay home to care for younger brothers or sisters.
- My school has honors and Advanced Placement classes.
- I have at least one teacher who cares about me.

My guess is that higher impediment scores would be linked to lower scores on the grit survey. I realize that what grit advocates want is to help young people better cope with such hardship. Anyone who has worked seriously with kids in tough circumstances spends a lot of time providing support and advice, and if grit interventions can provide an additional resource, great. But if as a society we are not also working to improve the educational and economic realities these young people face, then we are engaging in a cruel hoax, building aspiration and determination for a world that will not fulfill either....

It is hard to finish what you begin when food and housing are unstable, or when you have three or four teachers in a given year, or when there are few people around who are able to guide and direct you. It is equally hard to pursue a career with consistency when the jobs available to you are low-wage, short-term and vulnerable, and have few if any benefits or protections. This certainly doesn't mean that people who are poor lack determination and resolve. Some of the poor people I knew growing up or work with today possess off-the-charts determination to survive, put food on the table, care for their kids. But they wouldn't necessarily score high on the grit scale.

Personality psychology by its disciplinary norms concentrates on the individual, but individual traits and qualities, regardless of how they originate and develop, manifest themselves in social and institutional contexts. Are we educators and policy makers creating classrooms that are challenging and engaging enough to invite perseverance? Are we creating opportunity for further educational or occupational programs that enable consistency of effort? Are we gritty enough to keep working toward these goals without distraction over the long haul?

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*For information about the *2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*, see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to enabling equity of opportunity and promoting whole child development.

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Please share relevant resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences!
Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Note: Responses come only to our Center at UCLA for possible inclusion in the next week's message.

We also post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm
and to *Facebook* -- access from the Center's home page
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/